



A LEARNING BRIEF

Multiracial Coalitions to Support System Change

The Growing Master Trainers Pilot Project
as an example of how we all win when
we work together for equity

The Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services at Portland State University integrates research, education and training to advance the delivery of services to children and families. The CCF research team engages in equity-driven research, evaluation and consultation to promote social justice for children, youth, families and communities.

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Introduction

There is a long and discouraging history in the United States of “divide-and-conquer” politics based on race (McGhee, 2021). Such manufactured divisions have come to be so ingrained in the American consciousness that they are reflexively accepted and referenced as an essential truth (Lopez, 2014). This brief challenges that perspective and asks us to consider the profound possibilities offered by multiracial coalitions working together to understand and advance equitable public policies that benefit everyone.

The Growing Master Trainers Pilot Project (GMT), an innovative initiative in the state of Oregon, illustrates what can be learned and accomplished for all groups when a racial equity lens is brought to bear on systems that disadvantage—to various degrees—both BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) and White communities. While BIPOC communities experience the most egregious forms of oppression in the United States, the majority of White communities are increasingly disadvantaged as well, as wealth becomes more concentrated in the hands of the few. Stark examples such as the opioid addiction crisis and declining life expectancy for working class White men have been well-documented in recent years.

GMT uncovered that many if not most of the barriers to the early childhood professional development system in Oregon that are experienced by BIPOC communities are also experienced by rural White communities. Efforts to address such barriers, this group realized, would not unfairly advantage or allow “special treatment” for BIPOC trainers—as is often believed—but would in fact benefit everyone. In the process, there was considerable growth in communication, shared understanding, and mutual regard across participating BIPOC and White leaders.

This fortunate outcome echoes recent work by Angela Glover Blackwell (2017) that identified the positive spillover effects of wheelchair curb cuts for the entire community. More broadly, it calls to mind the work of John A. Powell and colleagues (2019) around “Targeted Universalism,” a novel policy mechanism for uniting divided communities around shared goals while identifying equitable, targeted strategies for reaching those goals. Heather McGhee (2021) has similarly documented the so-called “solidarity dividend,” generated by coalitions forged across race and class. In a time of growing conflict in Oregon and across the country, policymakers are encouraged to engage with these emerging and promising approaches to healing divisions and supporting our collective interests and wellbeing.



Growing Master Trainers Pilot Project Description

The Early Childhood Funders Learning Circle has been convening Oregon foundations over the past ten years for group learning around early childhood issues. In 2017, the Collaborative decided to fund a pilot project aimed at improving outcomes for children furthest from opportunity. The pressing issue identified was the need for more appropriate and accessible professional development opportunities for childcare providers from communities of color, linguistically diverse communities, and rural/frontier communities. The collaborative hypothesized that providers would be more likely to participate in and benefit from professional development (PD) opportunities that reflected the cultures, languages, strengths, and needs of communities. In turn, participation in culturally-responsive PD would support high-quality early learning experiences and improve child outcomes for nondominant communities.

This project became known as the “Growing Master Trainers Pilot Project” (GMT). Currently, Master Trainers are the only trainers authorized in the state to deliver advanced professional development trainings. At project start-up, BIPOC, linguistically diverse, and rural/frontier early childhood education trainers were significantly underrepresented among Master Trainers, e.g., there was only one Asian-identifying Master Trainer in Oregon. The goals of the project were to: 1) Increase the number of Master Trainers representing BIPOC, linguistically diverse, and rural communities who could design and deliver high-level trainings, and 2) increase the number of advanced trainings (Set-Two and Set-Three) that are language-, culture- and location-relevant.

In recognition of the expertise and unique positioning of BIPOC-led organizations in Oregon, the collaborative brought together a group of culturally-specific/culturally-agile organizations (CSOs) with a group of state-funded organizations representing rural/frontier communities (“Child Care Resource and Referral” or CCR&Rs, and one Early Learning Hub), to identify system barriers and advise the pilot project design. The Oregon Center for Career Development (OCCD), a state-funded organization that implements early childhood education (ECE) professional development standards and systems in Oregon, was contracted to provide support to the project, and an external project manager was brought in to facilitate and manage the process.

As the advisory group (the “Community Council”) began to meet, however, it became apparent that the project design and implementation plan had largely been pre-determined by the funders and OCCD, and was based in part on a series of arguably deficit-based and White-centric assumptions. The multiracial composition of the advisory group offered an opportunity as well as some challenges to working together. Most significantly, perhaps, the project was predicated on supporting nondominant trainers to assimilate to the current PD system via a mentoring approach, rather

than fundamentally questioning exclusionary system requirements. After a period of crisis and frank feedback from the Community Council, the funders and core project team made a number of significant and bold pivots in order to enable a more authentic, participant-driven process and design—including an extension of the project timeline and additional funds to support the same. The Community Council was recast as a bona fide leadership group with decision-making power related to project design and implementation, and key project staffing changes were made to support this new approach. Altogether, new life was breathed into the project and a process undertaken to build more authentic and responsive relationships among the partners.

Using this new approach, the Community Council, in consultation with OCCD project staff, decided to utilize the already existing “Sponsoring Organization” mechanism as a promising pathway for supporting and developing particularly talented and/or proven staff as Master Trainers. In effect, this approach empowered participating organizations to become “Sponsors,” with the jurisdiction to use their own, community-specific criteria to identify staff already capable of designing and delivering trainings at the highest (“Master”) level, as well as those with potential to grow into the role. Participants would benefit from relevant, in-house guidance, and develop trainings responsive to community-defined concerns and interests.

It is important to reiterate that the Sponsoring Organization mechanism was already available to any qualifying organization in the state, and was not unique to the project, nor to the participating organizations, i.e., it did not represent “special treatment.” It was not, however, a mechanism that had been publicized nor widely utilized prior to the pilot project. The great majority of Sponsoring Organizations in the state were CCR&Rs. (See <https://www.pdx.edu/education-career-development/sponsoring-organizations> for more information on Sponsoring Organizations in Oregon).

Each organization and participating trainer received a modest grant/stipend to support participation. OCCD was likewise funded to provide intensive “case management” to each organization and developing trainer, as they created and submitted trainings to OCCD for approval. Concurrent with project implementation, the redefined leadership group developed a system-level critique of current exclusionary and operationally inequitable policies and procedures, including the following:

- Overemphasis on higher education; life experience undervalued
- Lack of access to required Adult Education training hours
- Lack of transparency and/or consistency regarding the criteria for evaluating training proposals
- Insistence on using certain terminology; feels like a “secret language”
- No support for organizations, trainers, and trainings in languages other than English
- Definitions of quality that privilege White dominant language, values and practices
- Focus on compliance and monitoring, rather than support and growth
- Deficit-based and anxiety-producing, rather than welcoming
- Overly-long, burdensome and seemingly arbitrary process

In response to these barriers, the Community Council created a series of recommendations for system change that currently are under consideration by OCCD and the Oregon Early Learning Division (ELD). An external evaluator was engaged throughout to document and provide feedback on the process, as well as track outcomes and lessons learned.

Data for this brief were drawn from Community Council meeting observations, multiple rounds of meeting feedback surveys, and repeated rounds of in-depth interviews conducted with Community Council members and project staff over the past four years of project implementation. More recently, a series of focused individual interviews was conducted with participating representatives of rural/frontier organizations (n=5) to better understand the particular perspectives of White-identifying Community Council members on the recommendations for system change generated by the project.

Key themes that emerged from the data are summarized below, supported by existing literature. Participation in the all data collection was entirely voluntary and confidential; quotations are included with permission of the individual quoted. Drafts of the brief were shared with respondents, in order to ensure accuracy of interpretation and invite feedback and corrections.



The Emergence of a Multiracial Coalition

From the beginning of the pilot, it was evident that the composition of the Community Council posed some challenges. Combining representatives of community-based, culturally-specific organizations, largely from the Portland Metro area, with representatives of state-funded, majority White organizations representing rural/frontier Oregon implicitly invoked long-standing, perceived urban/rural, BIPOC/White divisions and sense of competition for scarce resources. Likewise, the CCR&R representatives, as those already familiar with and facile in negotiating the White dominant early childhood professional development system, in large part perceived their role as advising and supporting the BIPOC newcomers in “learning the rules” and assimilating to existing structures. Indeed, the original proposed mechanism for helping aspiring BIPOC Master Trainers was mentoring by a current Master Trainer, the vast majority of whom are White in Oregon.

As BIPOC CSO leaders began to share their understandings of system barriers experienced by their communities, they also reported feeling silenced and disregarded by the White women in the group; the CCR&R representatives expressed distress and frustration that their “good advice” and “realistic” recommendations for assimilating to the system weren’t being taken seriously. Likewise, BIPOC leaders pushed back against the deficit narratives informing the original project design and spoke of the need for culturally-specific training that recognized and responded to the particular strengths, needs and preferences of their communities. CCR&R representatives, understandably steeped in mainstream notions of child development and “evidence based” interventions, wondered if that meant loosening standards for quality and compromising the well-being of children.

As this dynamic emerged, it became apparent to project staff that an explicit equity lens—and support for group learning/process around racial equity—would be central to the collective work. To initiate this process, an equity trainer was brought in to provide a day-long training. Although not a panacea for what are often complex dynamics in multiracial groups, this training proved to be a turning point for the group. Key tensions were surfaced and named, laying the groundwork for a significant pivot in approach. Rather than supporting BIPOC trainers to meet the arguably exclusionary, inequitable requirements of the current system, the group would work to identify mechanisms for mitigating those barriers and transforming the system itself. Likewise, the CCR&R representatives reported greater awareness of their own privilege and becoming more intentional about listening and stepping back in discussions.



As the group turned its attention to system barriers, rather than to the (implied) deficits of BIPOC and rural trainers, there was a marked shift in the quality of conversation. Recognition of some shared barriers began to emerge, along with an expanded awareness of and attention to racial/ethnic diversity that also exists in rural/frontier Oregon. Participating CCR&Rs identified recruitment of BIPOC and linguistically diverse trainers as a priority for the pilot, in addition to supporting White rural trainers. Tensions began to ease as relationships and trust were slowly built. By the time—several years later—that the group was ready to make formal recommendations to the ELD for system change, there was collective recognition that many, if not all, of the proposed recommendations would in fact benefit both BIPOC and rural White trainers. All participants reported that participation in the pilot had been a transformative learning experience that offered a significantly different view on the current system and innovative ideas of where to go from here in supporting high-quality, relevant professional development opportunities for all early childhood trainers in Oregon. Many participants likewise expressed a sense of personal growth and greater understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the diverse communities represented.



Lessons Learned

Local control meets culturally-responsive

One of the primary lessons learned was that under close examination, “culturally-responsive” isn’t limited to becoming more responsive to nondominant racial/ethnic/linguistic groups, but in fact parallels efforts to be responsive to local (e.g., rural) conditions and push back on standardization.

White rural/frontier communities represent distinct cultures and may in fact have their own understandings and preferences that aren’t well-represented by mainstream dominant (urban/suburban) systems. In part, this realization led one project staff to declare the state system itself, “culturally specific,” in that it reflects a particular perspective (White dominant), yet is centered as normative and thus rendered invisible.

Participating rural/frontier CCR&Rs (and Hub) shared long-standing feelings on the part of their communities of being treated as “less than” and/or misunderstood by urban Portlanders. Trainers from other parts of the state were also perceived as unwilling to venture out to rural/frontier areas and do the work of authentic relationship-building, relying instead on online trainings:

It’s been experienced as an excuse to do things cheaper and not have a relationship.

—Early Learning Hub representative

The high value put on relationships itself was something emphasized by both the BIPOC leaders and rural/frontier representatives:

The important part...is the local [connection]; had it not been for knowing us and us helping them through the process [it wouldn’t have worked]. It’s too intimidating if you don’t know anyone, don’t know the system. —Early Learning Hub representative

For these reasons, the Sponsoring Organization approach utilized by the pilot made sense for both the BIPOC and rural/frontier communities. The SO approach empowers nondominant communities of all kinds to be more responsive to the needs and preferences of their identified communities, rather than being forced into a one-size-fits-all approach, modeled on one type of person/community implicitly defined as “normal.”

In other words, although BIPOC communities on average experience the greatest inequities, working class White communities also experience barriers to a system that concentrates power in the hands of the most privileged groups, i.e., highly-educated, affluent Whites. Using a one-size-fits-all model reinforces the structures supporting those with the power to define “universal” standards and qualifications. Because they don’t have to contend with racism, working- and middle-class Whites may be better positioned than BIPOC folks to earn status and recognition via “playing by the rules,” but it’s still not a level playing field.

Formal education isn’t everything

One of the clearest and most significant examples of how changes to increase accessibility of the early childhood professional development system to BIPOC communities also improves accessibility for rural/frontier trainers was in the area of higher education.

Probably the biggest barrier to BIPOC trainers becoming Master Trainers, identified early on in the pilot, is the requirement that Master Trainers have a four-year college degree. BIPOC trainers—and to an even greater degree—linguistically diverse trainers—face multiple, systemic obstacles to getting a BA in the United States, including everything from being actively discouraged from pursuing higher education and experiencing disproportionate rates of school “discipline,” to attending often underfunded and lower-performing schools, the shortage of BIPOC teachers, culturally-biased assessment and standardized achievement measures, lack of access to college preparatory services and application support, the astronomically high price of higher education, etc. (Furfaro, 2020). Rural communities likewise experience multiple barriers to higher education, including some of the same barriers identified for BIPOC communities, as well as significant challenges in access and transportation.

In 2019, only a little more than a third of Americans had four-year college degrees, with non-Hispanic Whites much more likely to have a BA (40%) than African Americans (26%) or Latinx Americans (19%) (2020 Census). As one White Community Council member observed, “Some of that [is] structural racism, you know, excluding members of society from higher education.” At the same time, only 21% of rural Whites had a BA in 2019—less than the rate for African Americans overall, and close to the rate for Latinx Americans overall.

Everyone on the Community Council, BIPOC and White alike, expressed a deep belief in the value of education, and the hope that anyone who wished to pursue a four-year degree would have access and sup-

port in order to do so. At the same time, the group also acknowledged that a BA does not automatically translate into skilled trainers or and/or effective trainings, and many of the best, most experienced trainers do not have four-year degrees. As a result, the BA requirement for becoming a Master Trainer both excludes some of the most highly qualified trainers, and screens in potentially unskilled trainers, simply by virtue of their degree. As such, the BA requirement—despite good intentions—may end up being a proxy for both Whiteness and social class—and reinforce the pattern of elevating trainers that neither reflect nor understand the communities in which they are providing training.

A lot of times we are skimming off the cream of the people that have all that rich experience, and all that knowledge that has been gained through the school of hard knocks. —CCR&R representative

We're trying to get people in because they have that expertise, because they have that passion. And the system still excludes people who are just naturally very good at this—but there's no way to show that in our current system. —CCR&R representative



One participating rural leader, who herself never completed a four-year degree, described the irony of being required by the state to hire relatively “green” staff, simply on the basis of having a BA, over more experienced, skilled staff who lacked the degree—and then having to teach those same staff how to train, along with the practical applications of the theoretical information they learned in school.

Another talked about discouraging past efforts to recruit local trainers:

As soon as they saw the [educational] requirements, they stopped the conversation, stopped engaging with us. They were suddenly too busy or you know, maybe sometime but not right now, it's not the best time. Because they're embarrassed that they don't meet the qualifications; they're afraid that they're going to reveal just how 'inadequate' they really are in this world. —CCR&R representative

The ELD has funds to support adults in returning to school and completing their BA, but as one rural/frontier leader explained, it's not so easy for adults with full lives and multiple responsibilities to drop everything to go back to school—or to commit to being in school part-time for what may be many years. It still feels like another barrier, as well as a lack of recognition for their lived experience:

Thanks for being willing to pay me to jump through hoops, but I can't do that right now. And honestly, I feel pretty good with who I am. But thanks anyway. —CCR&R representative

It's also not clear that there will be a meaningful return on the investment:

I don't know that it's going to happen until we get to a place where early care and education really pays a worthy enough wage to encourage people to pursue a track of higher education. —CCR&R representative

As a result, the Community Council is recommending to the ELD that the requirement for a BA be replaced by an AA plus experience. An Associates Degree is much more accessible for both BIPOC and rural/frontier communities, as well as linguistically-diverse communities (some community colleges in Oregon are beginning to offer Spanish-language ECE courses/degrees). It is a shorter time-commitment, vastly more affordable than a four-year degree, locally available in most cases, and more likely to offer flexible course scheduling. It may also be more directly applicable than the BA to early childhood education, with a focus on understanding child development, real-world application and field experience.

Community Council members, BIPOC and White alike, are enthusiastic about the possibilities that this change would open up for marginalized communities. Although all agree that early childhood care providers deserve recognition as the skilled professionals that they are, the push toward mainstream dominant credentialing in the name of gaining recognition for the field also runs the risk of excluding and devaluing the predominantly BIPOC and working-class White women who provide the vast majority of care and as such possess great wisdom and experience:

I think that knowledge, the education is extremely important. But we also have to find a way to accommodate people who have figured out how to become really good at what they do, without being on that track. —CCR&R representative

I'm just really excited to see who's going to come out of the woodwork. A lot of people that run amazing programs that have approached us in the past to do training I think will suddenly come back to the table and be interested. —CCR&R representative

Support rather than gatekeeping

In addition to the education requirement, the multiracial Community Council identified a number of barriers presented by the training proposal review process. BIPOC and White trainers alike reported an unwelcoming, unsupportive system seemingly most focused on gatekeeping and enforcing a kind of “secret language,” or ivory tower training jargon. All agreed that the system was particularly inaccessible for trainers that speak languages other than English, and for those with higher education credentials from countries outside the United States.

The process is a set-up for underrepresented folks: it relies on academic language, it relies on the written word, and it's in English. While lacking authenticity and depth. —System partner

Ironically, the CCR&Rs also shared that some of the most highly qualified and educated potential trainers—from a mainstream dominant perspective (e.g., former college instructors)—were also discouraged from becoming trainers, as a result of the heavy-handed and seemingly arbitrary review process.

They kind of walked away because they didn't really like the idea that somebody was critiquing them and giving them that kind of feedback without some back and forth conversation about the why. —CCR&R representative





In response to this feedback, OCCD project staff made a concerted effort to move beyond a gatekeeping function to play a more supportive and consultative role. Over time, the OCCD project staff characterized their role as demystifying and “translating” the system requirements in order to make the system more accessible to nondominant communities. Examples of supports provided include:

- ➔ In-person training in the principles of adult education
- ➔ Consultation around the training proposal development process
- ➔ Timely and constructive feedback via dialogue with participating trainers (avoiding “red pens”)
- ➔ Providing a glossary of training jargon (while moving away from an overemphasis on the inclusion of certain vocabulary)
- ➔ Bilingual/bicultural staff to support Latinx-identifying and Spanish-speaking trainers
- ➔ Deliberate efforts to expedite what is often experienced as an overly-lengthy process
- ➔ Overall change in tone to become more welcoming

Feedback from the rural/frontier CCR&R representatives regarding these changes has been effusive, and with it, a sort of recognition that they had in many ways just been accepting a process widely acknowledged as dysfunctional, without understanding that it was truly inequitable for many groups. A greater awareness of how the proposal review process excluded BIPOC trainers, coupled with the experience of seeing some of those barriers mitigated, shone a light on the possibility for system change that would benefit everybody.

The reviewers need to learn to read between the lines a little bit, when what’s on the page doesn’t quite align with academic language. There should be follow up to say, “Please explain, help me understand what you mean”—spend time on that, rather than going back and forth about word choice. I’d actually really prefer that to when people just parrot the “right” words. It feels less trustworthy, but the system forces approval because it looks good on paper. —System partner

This is in stark contrast to the attitude voiced at the beginning of the project, that BIPOC and linguistically-diverse communities would just have to learn “the rules” and “suffer” through the bureaucracy (much as they themselves had done), in order to become Master Trainers.

Feedback from BIPOC trainers and Community Council leaders has also been very favorable, albeit more tempered. OCCD project staff were experienced as warm, welcoming and supportive, and pilot participants express great appreciation for the supports received. The Latinx-serving organizations were clear that participation would have been near impossible without the support of the bilingual/bicultural staff person:



It's so helpful for her to relay the information in Spanish to staff—these are complicated things to explain. I can just say, ask [bilingual/bicultural project staff] those questions, that's what she's there for! That has been amazing! And it really highlights what has been missing—what was needed and why there were so few trainers of color. Without [her] support, it wouldn't have happened. —BIPOC leader

At the same time, BIPOC participants wonder if the system itself has been transformed or if it's just these particular staff and the qualities they bring to the job.

The people we've been working with have a better understanding of us, but if they leave, I don't know if it will stick—if it's really an understanding the entire organization (OCCD) has gained. Particular staff, particular leadership, can make a big difference. I don't know what else OCCD is doing other than the pilot. What about after the pilot is over? I think that's the only way we'll know. But right now, yes, the people we're working with are acting more culturally responsive. —BIPOC leader

There is also a recognition of greater and continued change work to be done, e.g., support for languages other than English and Spanish and financial support for foreign degree translation. It should be noted that OCCD itself does not necessarily have jurisdiction to make all of the proposed changes to the system; ultimately, ELD approval and funding is needed for full implementation.

Despite the work yet to be done, it is clear that the strides made in identifying and beginning to address these obstacles not only make the system more accessible and supportive for BIPOC trainers, but for rural/frontier communities as well—and even highly-educated, highly-privileged aspiring trainers. Of particular note is the importance placed across communities in the value of relationship, personalization and responsiveness—rather than the faceless and often dehumanizing nature of bureaucracies intended to enforce accountability and “fairness” through standardization to the dominant culture's understandings and values.

Equity supports quality

A concern often expressed around culturally-specific and/or locally-designed services is that quality will be compromised. This concern was likewise raised at the beginning of the Growing Master Trainer pilot, with the implication that more flexibility and options for customization would open the door to lower standards for trainings. A strong belief was expressed in the research-based “universals” of child development that might be compromised if BIPOC communities were allowed more latitude in designing trainings responsive to their communities’ strengths, needs and interests.

BIPOC Community Council leaders were quick to highlight the implicit racism embedded in these expressed concerns. On a fundamental level, it was experienced as insulting that seasoned and dedicated leaders would be either too ignorant to understand the “truth” about child development and/or insufficiently concerned about the well-being of children and families in their communities. Most cynical, perhaps, was the unspoken implication that BIPOC trainers might try to “cheat” the system for their own gain by becoming Master Trainers.

The conversation is really interesting around quality. Perception that if you adjust the system to increase equity, the question that always comes up is around quality. A kind of structural racism—the assumption that lower quality care is happening. —Project staff



BIPOC leaders also pointed out that the current system does relatively little in the way of actually ensuring quality trainings: having a BA and using mainstream dominant training jargon were characterized as inadequate proxies for quality. Likewise, OCCD lacks the capacity/funding to routinely collect, analyze or report on training evaluation data, so there is no consistent feedback loop or rigorous quality control mechanism currently in place. Indeed, four years into the project, both BIPOC and White Community Council members identified that an unfortunate amount of lower-quality training is currently being delivered by predominantly White Master Trainers:

There are a lot of people who are Master Trainers right now that probably shouldn't be as far as if you're looking at quality control....Just because someone looks good on paper and can check all the boxes does not make them an excellent trainer. —CCR&R representative

I think the way the system was before allowed the subpar trainers through because all they had to do is fill out a form and tweak the words. —CCR&R representative

The logic is flawed in thinking that this [making the system more accessible] is going to create a problem. We already have the problem! —CCR&R representative

BIPOC leaders reported attending trainings in which they literally felt embarrassed for/frustrated with ineffective White Master Trainers who seemingly fail to keep current in the field:

Sometimes we sort of laugh, even though it's not really funny, at how low-quality the trainings are, e.g., they have outdated information, aren't well-presented, etc., but people keep taking them because they need them to move up the ladder—not because they're learning anything. Just doing it to get your certificate. So many people are just on their phones, not paying attention. —BIPOC leader

Refocusing the system away from credentialing alone and toward individualized, meaningful support and feedback, therefore, is likely to support quality for both nondominant trainers and the more privileged trainers who have slipped too easily through the cracks. Likewise, there has been growing recognition within the group that customization to local conditions and communities has the potential to greatly enhance quality, as well as uptake:

I really feel that's why it's so important to have trainers who are a part of the communities that they're training because you're going to feel more safe around people you know and trust. —CCR&R representative

We know babies have the same needs, but there are different ways to get there—it doesn't all have to look exactly the same. Equity is really around customization. The big challenge for us is how do we make it work for everyone? Maybe you have to try things that you don't do all the time to support various groups. We need to listen, to adjust...it means creativity, flexibility, individualizing, listening. —Project staff

Further, it's not clear that the existing evidence base accurately represents the diversity of human experience: the vast majority of child development research has been conducted by Western, White researchers with Western, White populations—and often the most privileged Western, White groups, e.g., White college students (Henrich, 2020). That doesn't mean the research is irrelevant, but perhaps should not be interpreted as universal “truths.” Certainly, it can be agreed that there is a need for research with a much broader array of groups, both BIPOC and White, urban and rural, American and international. Revisiting simplistic (and often implicitly racist/classist/xenophobic) notions of quality is another mechanism that would support greater equity for both BIPOC and rural communities, and indeed, likely result in higher-quality trainings across the board.

The importance of relationships: working together for social justice

In multiple rounds of interviews, focus groups, and meeting observations, GMT participants—both BI-POC and White—repeatedly emphasized the importance of authentic conversation and relationship-building to the project's success. Likewise, participants identified that these conversations were not possible until equity was centered and White participants in particular were willing to do more listening and engage in self-reflection. It was also acknowledged that this kind of process takes more time than White dominant systems typically allot—considerably more time. Bona fide equity work is not, by definition, “efficient”:

We're learning that projects like this—projects focused on equity—take longer. There's a lot of potential for misunderstandings; for not having strong relationships at the outset. It takes time to bring people together around really complex issues. The slow pace is hard but we're learning that waiting is sometimes necessary. —Project staff

We're learning a lot about needing to stop and take time. I think we needed to spend more time up front building connections with people. More time grounding people in the system. And spending more time addressing the equity pieces up front. —Project funder

According to participants, the payoff was tremendous, both personally and professionally. A number of Community Council members reported never before having participated in such a transformative learning process.

I've never been involved in a process like this before, and I've learned so much. I've shed more than one tear, experienced some shame, just recognizing all of the barriers I was never aware of. It's really been very humbling to realize that the system was designed for people like me. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be in this group. —System partner

This speaks volumes to the potential offered by cross-racial coalition building, not only in terms of system improvement, but in starting to break down those barriers to shared humanity and well-being. Almost every single member of the group has shared heartfelt feedback on the process:



I'm really encouraged by the way we meet together—that we really take the time to listen together, have a conversation. That encourages me.

This feels different regarding the intentionality around creating a more cohesive community. It's very unusual in my experience. Noticeably different in that aspect. There's a tremendous amount of time devoted to empathy building.

We've developed relationships to talk openly together—and that can be difficult. Sometimes, groups never get anywhere.

Relationships have been the most rewarding. Most people on the Community Council I didn't know before. It's been really interesting to hear perspectives different from my own.

I enjoy having that open dialogue with people in the community—it's very powerful to hear what other people are experiencing; what other people are dealing with.

I really like the opportunities to connect with rural Oregon. It's been really eye-opening to hear they have many similar issues. I suspected, but I didn't really know. So that's been really interesting.

Our group has developed trust and respect among each other. I'm proud to be a part of this mission and working with others in the field that understand the importance of our end goal.

The group feels more inclusive, especially for differing perspectives. This makes me feel supported.

Everyone in the group allows each to participate and feel like no question is wrong.



Conclusion

Given the long and painful history of race relations in this country, multiracial coalitions are not easy and by definition, must begin with an acknowledgement that not all oppression is of the same magnitude. Racism has and continues to benefit all Whites, even as working- and middle-class Whites also suffer relative to the so-called “one-percent.” Nonetheless, much can be gained when a racial equity lens is brought to bear: we understand now that the “rising tide” for affluent White Americans did not in fact lift all boats. On the other hand, recent economic modeling suggests that addressing the inequities disproportionately experienced by BIPOC communities would indeed support the overall economy and benefit everyone (Peterson and Mann, 2021).

Efforts such as the Growing Master Trainers Pilot Project provide an inspiring example of what is possible when time, space and support is provided for multiracial groups to build authentic relationships and join forces in challenging systemic inequities. As so eloquently articulated by a grassroots organizer from rural America, “We’ve found the enemy and it’s not each other.” (McGhee, 2021, p. 273). At the same time, these conversations are complex and easily fall back into established “zero-sum” scripts and misplaced narratives that scapegoat BIPOC communities for the losses experienced by everyday White people over the past 40 years. In response to this challenge, concerted public messaging campaigns that explicitly link racism and broader economic harms, such as the Race-Class Narrative project, are currently underway (<https://www.demos.org/research/race-class-our-progressive-narrative>).

Other promising strategies include the Targeted Universalism approach introduced earlier, a novel policy mechanism for uniting divided communities around shared goals, while identifying equitable, targeted

As many commentators and social scientists have documented, there is a great divide in the United States right now around issues of racism and what has been termed “toxic class resentment” (Galston, 2021). So-called racial “dog whistling” pits nondominant communities against one another and undermines multiracial coalitions in support of shared rights and collective well-being (Haney-Lopez, 2015). This false narrative and scarcity mindset has seemingly contributed to low income White communities often voting against their own apparent interests (Kristof, 2020).

strategies for reaching those goals. As demonstrated by the Growing Master Trainers pilot project, one size never actually fit all, not for BIPOC communities, not for White communities. GMT likewise illustrated that although BIPOC communities typically have higher levels of need due to long-standing inequities, there is ample room for improvement for many White communities as well. As John A. Powell and colleagues explain, “Strategic interventions that redesign institutional arrangements will affect many groups simultaneously... it becomes clear that many more people have a stake in these changes than the least well-off. In this way, broader coalition building can be realized and greater political will created” (Powell, Menéndez & Ake, 2019, p. 30). As one White-identifying CCR&R representative summed it up:

I think that the changes we are going to make will support our White rural trainers just as much as they will those from communities of color. So I don't think it's going to increase barriers anywhere; I think it's going to reduce barriers across the board.

Recommendations

In light of these lessons learned and emerging understandings from the fields of communications and public policy research, policymakers, administrators and advocates are encouraged to consider the recommendations outlined below. Oregon has an opportunity to be on the forefront of innovative approaches to multiracial coalition building to the benefit of all.

- Employ public messaging that links the interests of BIPOC and White communities.
- Explore innovative strategies such as Targeted Universalism to support coalition-building and effective, equitable policymaking and implementation.
- Provide support for long-term, multiracial coalitions in identifying areas and mechanisms for system reform that center racial equity; understand that in doing so, systems will almost certainly be improved for low- and middle-income White communities as well.
- Normalize expectations for explicit discussions of racial equity and personal self-reflection.
- Whenever feasible, consider options for moving beyond top-down, “one size fits all” policymaking and administration. “Equality” does not mean “equity.”
- Be cautious about assuming that mainstream research that relies on predominantly White samples, values, and understandings represents universal truths for all communities. And the corollary—fund more research with BIPOC communities, led by BIPOC researchers.
- Avoid over-valuing formal education in lieu of lived experience; this systematically disenfranchises a significant proportion of Americans, BIPOC and White alike, and deprives children, families and communities of rich sources of wisdom and expertise.
- Engage in nuanced conversations with communities about what “quality” services look like and how they can be supported; avoid unilaterally imposing requirements and metrics designed without input and feedback from communities.
- In order to recruit and retain representatives of nondominant communities, BIPOC and White alike, reorient compliance-based and gatekeeping systems toward partnership and support.
- Adopt a learning orientation throughout: these are complex challenges that require ongoing feedback, reflection, and iteration.

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