



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 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 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 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

In 2017, the Early Childhood Funders Learning Circle brought together a group of culturally-specific organizations 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 develop and deliver culturally-responsive and linguistically-diverse professional development trainings for early learning providers. The Oregon Center for Career Development (OCCD), a state-funded organization that implements early childhood education professional development standards and systems in Oregon, was contracted to provide support and guidance to the project.

Representatives of each organization were asked to serve on an advisory group tasked with identifying system barriers and informing the pilot project design. This group, in consultation with OCCD project staff, decided to use the “Sponsoring Organization” mechanism to designate and develop particularly talented, experienced and/or promising staff as trainers. 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. Each organization and participating trainer received a modest grant/stipend to support participation. OCCD

was funded to provide intensive “case management” to each organization and developing trainer, as they created and submitted trainings to OCCD for approval.

Concurrent with pilot project implementation, the leadership group developed a system-level critique of current inequitable policies and procedures. Some of the major barriers identified included:

- 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 put together 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.



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, project staff and funders 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 all participants, 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.

As these tensions began to play out within the group, it became apparent 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 “quick fix,” this training proved to be a turning point for the group. Rather than supporting BIPOC trainers to meet the arguably exclusionary requirements of the current system, the group would work to identify mechanisms for transforming the system itself.

As the group turned its attention to system barriers, 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. 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.

Local control meets culturally-responsive

One of the primary lessons learned was that “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. White rural/frontier communities represent distinct cultures and may have their own understandings and preferences that aren’t well-represented by mainstream dominant (urban/suburban) systems. Participating rural/frontier organizations shared long-standing feelings on the part of their communities of being treated as “less than” and/or misunderstood by urban Portlanders.

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.”

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 by 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 (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.

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 support 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.

As a result, the Community Council is recommending that the requirement for a BA be replaced by an Associate degree plus experience. An AA is much more accessible for both BIPOC and rural/frontier communities: 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.

Support rather than gatekeeping

The Community Council also identified a number of barriers presented by the training proposal review process. BIPOC and White trainers alike reported an unwelcoming, unsupportive system seemingly focused on gatekeeping and enforcing a kind of “secret language,” or ivory tower training jargon. Ironically, the CCR&Rs shared that some of the most highly educated candidates were likewise discouraged from becoming trainers as a result of the heavy-handed review process. In response to this feedback, OCCD project staff made a concerted effort to play a more supportive and consultative role.

The response from rural/frontier CCR&R representatives has been effusive, along with a recognition that they had 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.

Feedback from BIPOC trainers and Community Council leaders has also been favorable. 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.

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.

BIPOC leaders 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:

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. Customization to local conditions and communities also has the potential to greatly enhance quality, as well as uptake.



The importance of relationships: working together for social justice

In multiple rounds of interviews, focus groups, and meeting observations, GMT participants—both BIPOC 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

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.

Conclusions

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). As demonstrated by the Growing Master Trainers pilot project, one size never actually fit all, not for BIPOC communities, not for White communities. Likewise, 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 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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