

CASE STUDY



Getting to the Heart of Equity: A Human-Centered Design Case Study

By Sarah A. Morrison



**Center for the
Study of
Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

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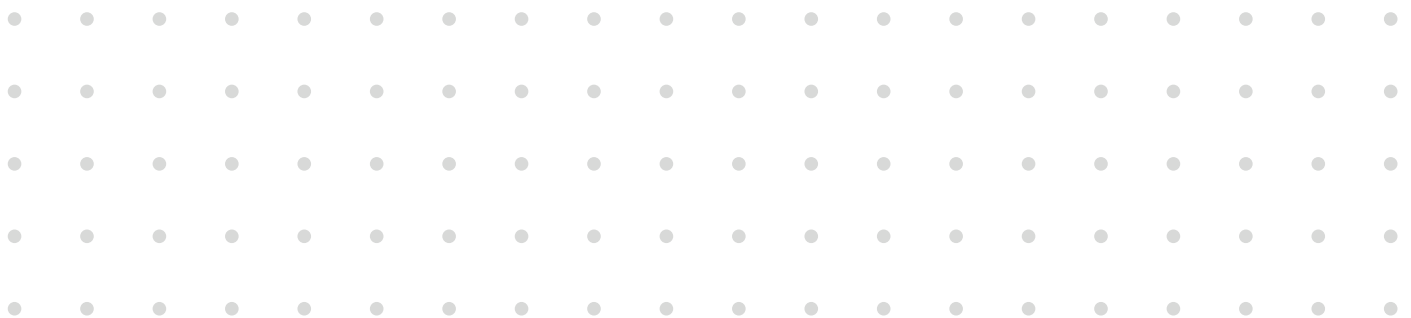
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About CSSP

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Prologue

The application of a human-centered design approach by Del Norte and Tribal Lands (DNATL), part of The California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative, illustrates one strategy for engaging and partnering with community members to design an initiative that strives for health equity. The journey of BHC DNATL is a story of intentionally seeking out, valuing, and listening to those who are often overlooked but who stand to be the most affected by proposed solutions. It reflects a transparent, interactive, and increasingly inclusive methodology to problem definition, solution design, and continuous learning.

Background

Del Norte County is in the rural, upper reaches of northwest Northern California. It is characterized by both its beauty and challenges. Three-quarters of the land within county boundaries is public—designated either as federal national forest or as state parks.¹ Preserving the land in this way means limited development and cleaner air, but it does limit the available tax base and employment opportunities. Its coastal perch provides breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean from the Redwood Highway. But the natural formation of the harbor in Crescent City, has earned it the title of “the Tsunami Capital of the continental United States,” enduring 31 tsunamis in nearly 80 years.²

Before White pioneers laid claim to the land, it was tended for generations by the Tolowa Dee-ni’ and the Yurok people and it is home to two other federally recognized tribes as well: Elk Valley Rancheria and Resighini Rancheria. The current Native American population within the county borders, similar to other parts of California and the nation, has experienced generational trauma due to broken treaties, removal from their lands, forced family separations, and intentional efforts to exterminate their tribes. This history and its implications for the present and future have not had widespread recognition anywhere in the United States. Del Norte County is no different.

The population of approximately 28,000³ in Del Norte County is slowly changing. It remains predominantly White, but the proportion of residents who identify as Latino and Native American is growing. In 2016, those identifying as “White alone” represented 63% of the population, a decline of 7% between 2010 and 2016.⁴ The Latino population represented 19% and Native American 6%. In general, the county has an aging population, with a growing proportion aged 65 and older.⁵

The parks, a state maximum security prison, and local authorities, make government the principle employer in the county with the economy largely dependent on public sector jobs. Health care and social assistance and retail operations provide another quarter of the jobs. In the last decade, overall unemployment has been as high as 13.5% and as low as 7.5%; the 25% of county residents living in poverty,⁶ however, has remained largely unchanged over a decade.



MAP CREDIT: 2017 DEL NORTE COUNTY ECONOMIC & DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

DNATL Accomplishments

Over the last decade, The California Endowment (TCE) has invested in 14 communities that have historically been marginalized and denied opportunities for their residents to thrive.⁷ The initiative, known as Building Healthy Communities (BHC), focuses on creating places where children are healthy, safe, and ready to learn. Del Norte and Tribal Lands (DNATL) are, collectively, one such community.

TCE has fostered strategies aimed at changing community institutions, policies, and systems. This work requires engaging multiple sectors and diverse stakeholders. BHC-DNATL is using a collective impact approach to “make DNATL the model of a healthy, rural community.”⁸ As a collective, they have a shared vision and, since 2010, BHC-DNATL has been working on implementing multiple strategies for achieving the vision through youth development and attacking challenges of low literacy, food insecurity, and workforce development.

BHC-DNATL Shared Vision

Our children should dream about their futures—and those dreams should be framed by family, health, safety, economic security, education, and hope. We believe that our children’s dreams are our community responsibility. We believe that early intervention and prevention are the critical keys to strengthening families, ensuring the economic assets of the families, preventing families from entering the justice and child welfare systems, instilling a life-long love of learning, and enhancing the health of every resident.

[Their efforts are paying off as they are moving the needle on a number of factors.](#) DNATL’s most chronicled progress has been in early childhood literacy where it has succeeded in strengthening the infrastructure needed to support children and their families to be school ready. In 2015, 33% of children had access to quality childcare, 50% of age-eligible children had access to preschool, and 33% of children entering kindergarten were kindergarten ready. By 2017, these percentages had changed dramatically with 62% of children having access to quality childcare, 75% of children having access to preschool, and 45% of those entering school being kindergarten ready. Greater access to quality day care made possible because a state Department of Education Early Head Start Partnership Grant enabled the Del Norte Child Care Council to nearly double the number of home-based childcare providers offering quality programs. In addition, the number of preschool slots for income-eligible 3- and 4-year-olds have increased as a result of the accountable bodies taking a hard look at the data about waitlists and adjusting budgets to fund more slots. Furthermore, the school system has improved the connection between preschool and kindergarten teachers, enabling kindergarten teachers to receive critical information about the developmental strengths and needs of children leaving preschool for kindergarten.

The people of Del Norte and Tribal Lands have also experienced other, intangible shifts in the community. In the dialogue that has been encouraged over the last several years, one of the core community tensions concerned equity. As one observer noted, *“This is not a community where conversations of race, inequality, and tension readily happen; that is starting to change.”* Now, community leaders are talking about how their recent efforts are getting to the “root of the problem” and have allowed community healing, bringing together the Latino, Hmong, Tribal, and White residents in the community.

Taking a New Perspective, Adopting a New Approach

In 2015, a community tragedy—the shooting death of a 13-year old Yurok boy—sparked a time for reflection. BHC-DNATL’s visionary destination seemed illusive and several factors appeared to be limiting progress. There was a general sense of being “stuck.”

Initiative leadership made what it refers to as a “pit stop.” The stop was intentionally designed for deliberation and renewal to ensure they were moving in the right direction and to rekindle a sense of urgency for the journey. Over the course of several weeks, community leaders in BHC-DNATL, drawn from funders and program implementers, took a hard look at the approach that had been driving the implementation of BHC-DNATL. This meant considering how they had been thinking about successful system change, and how they had established goals and selected and implemented ideas. Some of the insights that emerged from community leadership engagement during the pit stop included (1) a lack of consensus on the approach and priorities of the initiative; (2) confusion about the goals and whether community members really knew or were engaged in the work of BHC; and (3) tensions around unaddressed inequalities and fear about how to address them. In other words, the destination was fuzzy, and the path forward was not shared.

The reflections prompted a new perspective, one that [focused on the experience of people rather than implementing a menu of programs and initiatives](#). Understanding what the children and families of the community were experiencing in their daily lives and how systems and policies were impacting them became the new drivers of change.

Coming out of the pit stop energized, BHC-DNATL community leaders sharpened their results focus to form clear, measurable goals, based on the lived experience of residents, that could be broadly shared by the community. They also began equipping themselves with new tools for the road drawn from what is known as human-centered design. BHC-DNATL has used these tools to support community teams to develop knowledge and design strategies for early childhood literacy, youth leadership, food access, resiliency, and health career pathways.

Human-Centered Design (HCD) is an approach to innovation with roots in the technology design world and ethnographic methods. HCD values the perspectives and knowledge of those most affected by the challenges and potential solutions. While there are varied approaches to the Human-Centered Design process, there are generally multiple phases that progress from establishing a basic understanding of the problem or opportunity to implementing and testing ideas. Although this progression is fluid, it could be represented as illustrated to the right.

Initially, there is an **understanding** or exploration phase in which the observations and stories of human experience from families and other actors are gathered, often using empathy-based research methods. **Insights** are then gleaned from the observations and stories and used as to spark ideas and possibilities through an inclusive **brainstorming** process. The ideas are culled and **implemented and continuously evaluated**, to ensure the innovation is having the desired result.



Adapted from Vechakul, Shrimali, and Sandu, Human-Centered Design as an Approach for Place-Based Innovation in Public Health: A Case Study from Oakland, California, 2015.

As applied in BHC-DNTAL, the human-centered design process had four distinct activities:

- forming the specific intent statement for change,
- conducting empathy research,
- co-creation of solutions by engaging a wide range of community stake holders
- testing and tracking solutions chosen for initial implementation.

Human Centered Design stages as applied in BHC-DNATL



PROJECT INTENT

Framing the Result

Literacy has long been a priority issue for BHC-DNATL because it has such a profound effect on long-term health and wellness. In fact, the School Systems Implementation Team (SSIT) was formed in 2009 to lead community activities to tackle this and other challenges preventing children and youth from experiencing educational success. The team membership included high-powered, knowledgeable community leadership: the Superintendent and Deputy School Superintendent of the school district, business leaders, a leader of the early childhood education system, and a member of the county board of supervisors. In 2011, the Community Wellness Vital Signs report, prepared by The California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University, recommended a “set of 20 core community wellness indicators,” prioritized by a team of Del Norte stakeholders. School readiness was one of the 20 indicators as the first ever assessment of school readiness indicated that only one-quarter of the children entering kindergarten had high skills in both kindergarten academics and self-regulation. As the SSIT addressed challenges to college and career paths, the importance of third grade reading as an intervention point became even more apparent to them.

Early, well-intentioned efforts such as tutors for third graders were implemented, but after two years no measurable improvements were observed. As one community leader noted, “it was really clear that tutoring, although a nice tool, isn’t going to solve the issue, especially when you realize that 50% of third graders were not reading at grade level.” Another community leader acknowledged, “we weren’t getting to the root problem. We really didn’t understand what these kids and families were going through at home, and what the true barriers were.”

In 2015, the available data continued to reveal several important aspects about early childhood literacy and the system in place to support early learners. Approximately 66% of children entering the school system in Del Norte County were unprepared for kindergarten. Once in school, available supports and services helped to improve the abilities of some children by the third grade, but it did not work for all children. The reasons for these conditions were unknown.

After the pitstop and with the help of human-centered design (HCD) experts from ThinkPlace, an international HCD organization, the SSIT began structuring what became known as the “Literacy Project.” First the SSIT considered what success would look like for the children born in 2014-2015, such as Marcus (pictured right). For this cohort of children, they set a specific, measurable goal for the community, families, and the education system to share: 100% of third graders in Del Norte and Tribal Lands would be reading at grade level by the year 2023. By establishing a goal that maintained a focus on every child’s experience, it centered efforts on equity. It is



PHOTO CREDIT: BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES DEL NORTE AND TRIBAL LANDS

not going to be acceptable for any child to fail. But, as recounted in the ThinkPlace report on the first phase of the Literacy Project, “School and community leaders felt that there was limited insight into what the tangible and intangible factors are that affect a child’s preparedness before they enter the school system.”

To begin to know how to achieve the goal and explore what they did not know, BHC-DNATL began to plot out the project by framing an intent statement. An intent statement has been described in the technical design field as a simple, “actionable sentence that can guide a project.”⁹ As reflected in the statement, the SSIT wanted deeper understanding of the day-to-day experiences of families and teachers. They believed the knowledge gained would lead to lasting changes.

Literacy Project Intent Statement

To gain deep insights into the complexity of factors impacting young people’s learning outside of “school” (both before they start school [pre-K]; and during the first three years of school) and to identify the tangible factors that enable and inhibit children’s capacity to attain literacy and, therefore, where the tangible levers of change lie.

To carry out this intent, a Core Design team was formed that included community experts drawn from the local education and early childhood systems, including leaders drawn from Del Norte Unified School District, Del Norte First 5, Del Norte Child Care Council, Howonquet Head Start, and the Family Resource Center. All of these local partners received training in the research approach and were partnered with experienced human-centered design specialists.

EMPATHY RESEARCH

Rigorously Incorporating Lived Experiences and Uncovering Root Causes

At the core of the human-centered design approach employed by BHC-DNATL in partnership with ThinkPlace, is empathy research. Empathy research is used to investigate the root causes of current conditions and opportunities for improvement. According to ThinkPlace, “*the focus of empathy research is listening to understand which involves deferring any opinions/ judgment, listening to someone’s whole story, and taking the time to understand both the story they bring to the surface and also their thoughts and feelings below the surface. From these rich and deep insights, a vivid picture can be developed that articulates the lived experience for the person being interviewed.*”

The research protocol included preparing interviewees for the process, obtaining consent from interviewees to participate, and emphasizing the message “you are helping us build our understanding of what it’s like for you as a parent and/or educator, and we’re learning from you.” It was important that participants felt safe to share their thoughts and experiences, so they were encouraged to select the location for the interview, which was often in their home.

Pairs of local leaders and researchers interviewed 27 parents and 11 educators, documenting their experiences and collecting their stories. The design team was very intentional about whose experiences they sought to understand and designed criteria for the families to be invited to participate. The range of parents engaged in the interviews was diverse, coming from a wide variety of incomes, neighborhoods, education levels, ethnic backgrounds, and marital status. Among the family members, 10 were Native American, three were Hispanic, and one was Hmong. Another 14 were White. The group of parents included a homeless teen mother living with her grandparent, and a young father who had recently been incarcerated because of allegations of methadone use and domestic abuse. The pool of educators invited to participate had to span the early education continuum “from family home care, preschool, Head Start, State Kindergarten, and a range of grade level teachers.”

In-home interviews with parents started with a “learning tour.” In the course of the tour, parents and children showed the research team where the children “read, played, did homework, etc.” Interview questions asked about daily routines and activities (ie, “tell us about your day”) as well as the hopes parents had for their children. The interview teams found the families and educators to be open and willing “to talk about their experience, their lives, and the people within it.”

According to a design team member, the interviews revealed a picture of the serious levels of stress and pain that families were going through. “We found a lot of families felt disconnected from their network of support. Many can’t rely on extended family members.”

After the interviews were conducted, synthesizing the learning began immediately. It was an iterative process that started with interview pairs debriefing their experience together and reflecting on key insights from their observations. After the recorded interviews had been transcribed, they were reviewed for additional findings, amendments to their initial observations, and important quotes that reflected the insights obtained. Finally, findings and themes were compiled to share with the larger project team. As an entire project team, all pairs shared the stories from the interviews to further identify “key themes, insights, and points of pain and satisfaction.” Out of this process emerged a set of learnings accompanied by quotes and insights. Members of the Core Design team have referred to the experience as transformational as they really learned to “feel” and understand the pain of parents and educators.

“There had been lots of intervention efforts and blame assessed. When we asked what the story behind the data was, that’s when we got the root of the problem.”

—School Superintendent

The empathy research produced a range of insights that made the literacy data more meaningful and underscored that there was not one simple solution to be implemented by any one party; families, teachers, education system, and the entire community—all needed to be involved. In addition, the outreach and rapport established through the interviews paved the way for conversations about race and equity— topics that had been previously unmentionable. As one leader noted, the process “increased an understanding that the path to equity is through addressing the generational trauma many residents have experienced.”

The insights revealed surprising similarities in the experiences of parents and educators alike. Not surprisingly, everyone wanted children to succeed, and everyone was invested in their success. But both shared perceptions about the other, such as “some deadbeat parents don’t care” and “that teacher hates my kid.” Both parents and teachers spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the work of meeting the needs of the children in their lives—being good parents and good teachers—in addition to juggling all their other responsibilities. They shared the same feelings of being ill equipped to adequately support and help children learn. And, for all—parents and educators alike—there was a lack of clarity about what it means to be “kindergarten ready.”



Synthesizing findings

- The interview pairs debriefed immediately after each interview, using an insight mining framework to pull out key observations
- Read the transcripts, pulled out key quotes and additional findings and completed worksheets for each interview
- Grouped together key findings and themed together, synthesized key themes through insight synthesis sessions
- Shared the stories from each interview conducted with the team and captured key themes, insights, points of pain and satisfaction

TABLE CREDIT: ADAPTED FROM DEL NORTE AND ADJACENT TRIBAL LANDS LITERACY PROJECT COMMUNITY BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE, DECEMBER 2016, THINKPLACE.

Some parents shared they were living “paycheck to paycheck” and not getting ahead of daily challenges. The research team observed that *“Parents feel a huge amount of stress if something happens which puts them behind in their schedule, which can be something as little as a child being slower to get ready in the morning. This was a particular issue for single parents.”*

For their part, teachers talked about the challenges of classroom management when children have different needs and different levels of preparedness for classroom work. They believed they needed access and time to engage in more professional development. One educator shared, *“I do not feel equipped to handle the wide range of behaviors, trauma, and special needs children are displaying in my classroom.”* Another noted, *“I am overwhelmed by everything I need to provide and do for my students throughout the work day. I don’t just teach, I have planning and paperwork as well as looking out for the children. I have to spend a lot of my own time, money, and resources to meet my students’ needs and the many requirements of the School District and State.”*

Parents and teachers desire to be in partnership with one another. Both spoke of wanting a “two-way” relationship but not all shared the same understanding of what is needed or what the priorities should be. The perspectives from the diverse group of parents interviewed underscored that a positive educational experience means differing things for different families. For others it meant their children were not bullied or judged, for other it meant finding purpose and meaning in learning.

Some parents feared their family being judged when the demands of daily living prevented them from being attentive to homework and school functions. From the teacher perspective, there was also frustration as one teacher commented, *“I need parents/guardians of children who are in my class to be on my team. I know parents love their children, however it’s a huge frustration when I feel like I am responsible for everything to do with their child— not just education but food, clothes, and school supplies.”*

Race was also perceived as a source of judgement and negative perceptions by parents. Parents yearned for teachers to get to know them on a personal level, to understand their circumstances, to be welcomed. As one parent shared, *“Please don’t judge me or my children. Take the time to learn our story. Acknowledge us and what we’ve been through and let’s create solutions together. My circumstances do not define me.”*

Other insights clustered around resource availability, in particular, early childhood education, and expectations for children entering kindergarten. Teachers affirmed having access to quality preschool was important for being kindergarten ready. They could see dramatic difference among their students who had attended preschool and those that did not. Not only does preschool provide early learning experiences but it allows for early identification of learning needs and opportunity for intervention. One teacher observed, *“What I have learned though is early assessment and intervention is vital.”* The picture that emerged from parents of very young children was one of a lack of appropriate day care options and inflexible work schedules. Those with preschool-age children were also challenged by trying to find the right preschool option and were not familiar with kindergarten expectations or what it means for their child to be “kindergarten ready.”

Insights from preschool and kindergarten teachers reflected a disconnect between the two as to what is expected of preschoolers entering kindergarten. Preschool teachers believed they need to focus on academic skills, but kindergarten teachers wanted children to have the social and emotional skills that would better allow them to sit still for learning and play well together. One teacher shared, *“It seems like readiness to begin school has changed in general... in our kindergarten classes it seems like there are some kids that have never sat down in a formal group before, handled scissors, handled a pencil....”*

Finally, the distribution of insights suggested to the Core Design team that families in Del Norte and Tribal Lands are, at any given time, distributed across and move among five broad categories ranging from “aspirational” to “drowning”. The families considered

to be” aspirational” knew the importance of education, could advocate for their children, and knew how to work around the system to fill gaps to help their children succeed. Those families who were “drowning” were generally overwhelmed by trauma, mental illness, drugs, and alcohol likely contribute to their lack of engagement. The families that fell in the middle were (1) “practical”—caregivers who knew how the system worked and knew how to keep their children safe; (2) “getting by”—caregivers who valued education, but were time poor and not confident about how to support their children or engage with the school; or (3) “struggling”—caregivers who themselves had struggled in school and were distrustful of schools, wanted their children to have a different experience with school, but did not know how to make it happen. The categories offered a way of understanding the difference experiences the Core Design team had encountered and recognizing that new strategies must account for this range of experiences.

Sharing the Literacy Project Findings

 <p>Sharing insights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took the wider team through our journey and analysis • Refined the key learnings and insights and developed the experience maps • Produced the final learnings, quotes, insights and experience maps
 <p>Walkthroughs</p>	<p>Shared raw outputs of insight sessions with educational, system and community leaders to share our process and findings during their development</p>

TABLE CREDIT: ADAPTED FROM DEL NORTE AND TRIBAL LANDS LITERACY PROJECT REPORT, FEBRUARY 2016, THINKPLACE

CO-CREATION

Inclusive Learning and Commitment to Shared Goals

In addition to empathy interviews, another critical aspect of the HCD approach from ThinkPlace is the inclusive, iterative nature of validating and sharing the study findings, using visual and interactive methods to collect new insights and solution ideas. In Del Norte County, an initial step in further validating the themes and co-creating a solution was to share the evidence collected with the community in multiple venues. This process included sharing the research and the resulting insights with educational, system, and community leaders including city, county, and tribal governing councils. The insights and experience maps were also posted in the community center and community members were offered 30-minute guided tours. Through these efforts, not only were the insights validated, but the sense of empathy—an understanding of the pain points experienced by parents and teachers—was extended to a broader circle of stakeholders. For example, when the United Indian Health Services participated in a walk-through, they decided to investigate reintroducing a “Reach Out and Read” program with a focus on using culturally appropriate books.

The insights sparked motivation to look at the quantitative data, and to ask how what was learned shows up in the data. As a result, some organizations looked at their data for the first time, or they saw the data differently. For example, one of the tribal-sponsored Head Start programs believed its two-year waitlist—with more than 50 families—was a sign of program quality. However, when the authorities learned about the experience of families—how desperate they were to place their children in preschool now, not two years from now—they realized they needed to take action and consider how they might expand the number of available slots.

In addition, BHC-DNATL convened a literacy symposium in June 2016 with nearly 200 attendees. After sharing the process and insights, participants were engaged in a facilitated brainstorming session using the Core Design Team's findings to "envision a better future state for children, parents, and educators." Participants were asked to think about the different categories of families that emerged from the empathy research rather than using a "one-size fits all" mentality and to reconsider the future experience of different age cohorts. Everyone was encouraged to contribute their ideas with several hundred being generated.

By the end of the symposium, the community had affirmed the ambitious goal that 100% of third graders in Del Norte and Tribal Lands would be reading at grade level by the year 2023. The rallying cry became "3Read23" and many participants completed commitment cards for future action. Subsequently, growing numbers of county and tribal governing councils and organizations also adopted this goal. To achieve "3Read23" the Del Norte Literacy Project identified a number of specific targets: increase preschool participation from 20 to 100%; improve access to quality childcare from 33 to 100%; improve kindergarten readiness from 33 to 95%; and increase access to preschool slots from 50 to 75% for income-eligible 3- and 4-year-olds.

Immediately following the symposium, the Core Design team reviewed all the captured ideas and created a "complete future experience map for children 0-9" that spanned 26-feet. Ultimately, the Core Design team created the "new futures map" for different age cohorts to illustrate a vision of change. The maps clearly (1) identifies what parents want; (2) what the empathy research revealed about current parent and child experiences; (3) how future



PHOTO CREDIT: BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES DEL NORTE AND TRIBAL LANDS

experiences would be for child, parent, and teacher; and (4) system change necessary to enable these future experiences. The maps offer a picture of possibility for community members to share and understand what they are working toward.

An adaptation of one of these maps is on the next page. It illustrates the future experience pathway of a child at 3 to 4 years of age, the pre-kindergarten phase. The future pathway reflects experiences of a competent and confident child, parent, and teacher because they are supported and prepared by the systems in the community. These systems provide access to preschool, welcome parents and build their knowledge about childhood development. Employers provide more flexibility so that parents can more easily participate in preschool activities.

Similar "new futures" maps were created for children birth to age 3, children age 5 starting kindergarten, and children ages 6 to 9, the early school years.

Future Experience Pathway: 3–4 years pre-kindergarten





CURRENT EXPERIENCE	PARENT AND CHILD	<p>1 The right day care and pre-school options are accessible to us and our child</p> <p>Finding the right day care or pre-school can be a challenge. Very few parents have the ability to explore options to ensure a good fit for their child</p> 	<p>2 We have the time to focus on our child's learning and kindergarten readiness</p> <p>For many parents their focus is on getting by day-to-day. There is little time or energy left to focus on their child's development, let alone start thinking about kinder readiness</p> 	<p>3 Our family's connected to a network of support that can provide back-up</p> <p>Parents who work fulltime and have limited support can find it hard to find child care or support when unexpected issues come up</p> 	<p>4 We understand our child's (social and emotional) development milestones and can deal with any issues</p> <p>Some families are able to provide a safe, nurturing environment that supports their child's social and emotional development. Other children live in chaotic home environments, they experience trauma and their social and emotional development is impacted</p> 
	CHILD	I go to preschool. learning is fun and I am getting ready to start kindergarten	My parents know what I am learning at preschool and we do things together at home to support my learning	When we have a special day at preschool, my parents can take time off from work to attend	I'm learning about the behavior expected of me. My confidence is growing
	PARENT	We know our child can go to pre-school, and we know this is vital for their transition to kindergarten	We have quality time with our child daily. We focus on their learning and we know what being 'kinder ready' looks like	We have a network of support we can call on if our child gets sick	We have tips and tools we use to help us manage our child's behavior at home
	TEACHER	I want to know my parents. I feel it's the most important connection I can make	I take the time to explain to my parents what literacy is. I encourage parents to visit often to understand kindergarten readiness	I understand how hard it is for parents when unexpected issues come up. I try to be as flexible as possible to help them out	I bridge strategies for social and emotional development between home and care/ school. I give parents tips to help with challenging behavior
WHAT NEEDS TO BE DIFFERENT	<p>Every child has the opportunity to attend preschool (or equivalent) and preschools prepare children for kindergarten</p> <p>Parents know when and how to enroll their children for preschool and feel welcome at their preschool</p>	<p>Families know about their child's developmental milestones</p> <p>They understand the importance of being kindergarten ready and have the tools to support them transition their child to kindergarten</p>	<p>Employers provide more flexibility for parents to spend critical time with their children during school time</p> <p>There are a range of ways for parents to build a support network</p>	<p>There is a recognized need to provide stability for children at preschool and support their social and emotional development</p>	

TABLE CREDIT: ADAPTED FROM DEL NORTE AND ADJACENT TRIBAL LANDS LITERACY PROJECT COMMUNITY BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE, DECEMBER 2016, THINKPLACE.

TESTING & TRACKING

Outcome-Focused Implementation

As a first test of the ideas generated at the Literacy Symposium, the Core Design team took the ideas to educational system leaders and some of the families that were originally interviewed. They were asked to consider the emerging opportunities and ideas and to provide feedback. Parents were asked how they thought the ideas would impact their lives and what adjustments they might make, if any. The process generated even more ideas. This left the Core Design team with the task of sifting through the ideas using two criteria: (1) impact and (2) viability. Using these criteria, they identified ideas that would have the greatest impact on shifting the current state of family experiences to the desired future state and what would be viable. The resulting list of ideas were taken back to the School System Implementation Team to build energy, consider what might be missing, and to capitalize on existing opportunities.

The activities implemented since the initial symposium are numerous and wide-ranging. Many can be grouped into strategies that (1) increase access to quality early childhood education; (2) offer parenting resources and education opportunities for parents; (3) reduce family stress; (4) strengthen working relationships and information sharing between preschool and kindergarten teachers; and (5) increase support for teachers. Examples of activities and programs in each of these strategies include:



View a video from the Literacy Initiative on co-creating community programs: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aprPMk46_jc

Improving quality and access to early education.

- *Improved quality of family-based childcare.* Spurred by being a part of the empathy research, local educators created a special literacy curriculum for family childcare home providers to help improve the quality of their programs. After an initial pilot phase, family day care providers were engaged to co-design curriculum improvements. Federal Community Development Block Grant funds have been secured to ensure all family-based childcare providers have access to the curriculum.
- *Improved access to preschool early education.* Multiple preschool programs, private and public, expanded access to families by adding full classrooms, extending half day programs to whole days, and/or expanding income eligibility.

Parenting resources for better connection and knowledge about child rearing.

- *Parent Connections Texting.* A cell phone application helps parents to be more connected to the resources they need to help their children get ready for kindergarten. It has been adapted specifically for the Del Norte population from Ready4K after it was initially piloted with 24 families. The adaptation was completed with parents and community service providers and focuses on parental mental health, self-care, and connection to local resources and services. Parents receive three texts a week that provided tips and activities to support their child's development and their own self-care. This application is supported by county Mental Health Services innovation funding.
- *Incredible Years Expansion.* The Del Norte Child Care Council added an Infant and Toddler class to its Incredible Years offerings, creating a full continuum of parenting class options for those who have children ages birth to age 10.

Addressing family stress.

- *Rethinking homework.* After a piloting period, all elementary schools have adopted revised homework policies for children in kindergarten through second grade designed to reduce family stress and encourage experiential learning rather than compliance with worksheets. During the pilots, teachers and parents reported that the new approach succeeded in reducing stress and allowing for more family connections around learning.
- *Breakfast in the Classroom.* This was a joint effort of the team focused on literacy and the team working to improve food security in the county. According to one school principal, the program has “resulted in less tardies and a calmer beginning of the day for students.”

Working relationships and information sharing between preschool and kindergarten teachers.

- Recently, Del Norte Unified School District (DNUSD) moved to a “cradle to career” approach and began quarterly convenings of teachers from preschool centers and public kindergartens. Through these regular meetings, they established shared understanding of and expectations for “kindergarten readiness.” In addition, the centerbased programs have synchronized their professional development days with those of DNUSD, allowing for shared training opportunities among the educators. Furthermore, preschool and kindergarten teachers collaborated to identify information sharing priorities and kindergarten teachers are now receiving the same developmental information as parents from the assessments completed by preschool teachers.

Development of and support for teachers and childcare staff.

- Increased substitute pool for teachers and childcare workers. The application process for substitute teachers and childcare workers has been streamlined to facilitate increasing the available pool. In addition, a six-week leadership development program for youth gave them the required courses and hands on practice in childcare settings and necessary background checks to qualify as childcare substitutes at the completion of the program. The availability of more qualified substitutes allows teachers to

have classroom coverage while they participate in professional development.

The Core Design Team has been continuously tracking progress, with both quantitative measures and assessment of changed experiences and reflecting on the experiences of the community. They continue to use empathy research to gather insights from parents and educators. As they move forward, they are conscious of being more intentional about Core Design Team diversity, including more cultural and educational expertise.

They are also striving to make the vision of shared data across systems a reality so that they may be better able to see and communicate to all both progress and points for further examination and improvement. The Core Design Team has learned that despite system commitments to share data, different sources and changing approaches to measuring indicators make it difficult to obtain and reconcile available data. For example, the school system has changed measurement approaches to kindergarten readiness, reading competency by third grade, and absenteeism over the years. In addition, some members of the Core Design Team also have concerns about the integrity of the data and are reluctant to have inaccurate data shared. However, the focus on specific, quantifiable goals for the 3Read23 campaign has increased attention to and an appetite for data among community leaders including parent advocacy organizations. Therefore, shared, transparent data remains an important goal.

To augment this process of continuous reflection and assessment, BHC-DNATL is putting into place a more formal evaluation framework that will establish milestones that all can see and measure. It calls for collecting both quantitative information about the number of services and opportunities available to children and their families and information about the quality of these services and how family members are experiencing the services. Once again focusing first on Marcus, the goal is to understand if he and his family are experiencing change. The signs of success may be how connected they are to a network of support and Marcus is attending a quality preschool and as he grows, the need for targeted support is identified early, and Marcus is reading at third grade level in third grade.

Conclusions

The BHC-DNATL story is still unfolding but the learning thus far can be useful to other initiatives focused on addressing historical inequities and changing complex systems. They are advancing equity through three intertwined mechanisms: (1) establishing shared community goals firmly rooted in the lived experience of families and individuals; (2) continuously reflecting back to the community what is being learned and what progress is being made as measured by the experience of the children and families in their community; and (3) developing human-centered design capacities as a community standard.

The application of Human-Centered Design not only allowed community members to gather useful knowledge for designing future strategies, it also provided a focus for community members to come together and learn more about the diversity of experiences in their community and appreciate that historical trauma has rippled through the lives of many residents. Harnessing the power of empathy has opened the door to more open conversations about race and equity. It has helped shift the balance of power so that community members are co-equals and partners in generating knowledge. Through the co-design process, community members are recognized for the expertise they contribute to knowledge development, they are seen not just as sources of information but as active participants in, and in some cases, leaders of knowledge development. The installation of HCD as a standard practice in addressing other critical issues is creating opportunities for community leaders to acquire empathy research skills.



References

ThinkPlace is an international strategic design consulting firm that works with leaders in public, private, non-profit and voluntary sectors “to create new and better futures” for people across the globe. With the support of The California Endowment, ThinkPlace began working with Del Norte and Tribal Lands in 2015. Since then, it has helped build human-centered design capacity among community leaders in BHC-DNATL. It has helped to produce several design documents which provided much of the detail contained in this case study. These reports include:

- Building Healthy Communities DNATL Mid-Initiative Refresh: Phase One, August 1015
- Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands Literacy Project. Insights from families and educators, February 2016
- Community Blueprint for Change, Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands Literacy Project, December 2016
- Conversation Tracker DNATL, March 2019

Other source material for this case study included:

- Community Wellness Vital Signs: Core Community Wellness Indicators for Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands Version 1.2, The California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University & Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands Learning and Evaluation Advisory Committee, May 2012
- Del Norte County Unified School District: School Absence, 2012-2013, The California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University, Jessica Van Arsdale, August 2013
- 2015/2016 Wild Rivers Community Foundation Yearbook
- Reading for Health, A Reimagined, Community-Driven Approach to Early Literacy in Del Norte County and Tribal Lands, Fernando Quintero, Berkeley Media Studios Group, September 2018
- Presentation materials provided by Geneva Wiki

Endnotes

¹ 2017 Del Norte County Economic & Demographic Profile, Del Norte, Center for Economic Development, California State University, Chico, p. 10

² See <http://newsfeed.time.com/2011/03/11/why-is-crescent-city-continental-americas-tsunami-capital/>

³ See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/delnortecountycalifornia/IPE120218#IPE120218>

⁴ 2018 Del Norte County Economic & Demographic Profile, Center for Economic Development, California State University, Chico, p. 6

⁵ 2018 Del Norte County Economic & Demographic Profile, Center for Economic Development, California State University, Chico, p 5

⁶ See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/delnortecountycalifornia/IPE120218#IPE120218>

⁷ See <https://www.calendow.org/places/>

⁸ See <https://www.calendow.org/places/del-norte-and-adjacent-tribal-land/>

⁹ See <https://markboulton.co.uk/journal/a-new-make-mantra-a-statement-of-design-intent/>