The Use of the World Café Process to Foster Parent–School Engagement in Culturally Rooted Early Childhood Montessori Programs: A Participatory Process

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Abstract

Parent engagement is one approach to decrease the opportunity gap for Black, American Indian, and all children of color. This report from the field describes the use of the World Café participatory approach to support parent engagement in five early childhood, culturally embedded Montessori programs. Serving the Whole Child (SWC) is a community–university partnership between St. Catherine University, Montessori Center of Minnesota, five early childhood Montessori schools, and school parent leaders. Using a participatory approach, parent leaders from each school codesigned the development, implementation, and analysis of the World Café. The World Café asked school parents what was working and what parents needed help with related to three topics: parent well-being, caring for a young child, and school–community connection. Each World Café was tailored to honor the school's unique community, cultural values, and family needs. Parent leaders synthesized and coordinated with schools to develop offerings to meet the priorities of the recommendations and key topics. World Café is a participatory process that may increase parent leadership and school engagement in ways that support caregiving and child success.

Key Words: parent engagement, school–parent relationship, World Café, early childhood education programs, Montessori, culturally diverse families

Introduction

This report from the field describes the use of a World Café process to increase parent engagement at five culturally embedded early childhood education programs. Parent engagement at school is one approach to decrease the opportunity gap for Black, American Indian,[1] and all children of color, yet parent engagement for low-income, immigrant, and/or populations of color remains limited. This report describes the use of a World Café to build parent/community dialogue and parent engagement in a participatory, culturally centered, and strengths-based manner. This report begins by describing the opportunity gap present for low-income families of color and immigrant families; the importance and diversity of parent engagement for positive child educational outcomes; the community–university partnership created to address this gap; and the participatory process of conducting World Café's at five early childhood programs. Finally, this report provides a summary of key learnings and suggestions for future efforts.

Background

Parent (inclusive of parents, fictive kin, and other household decision makers) engagement at school early in a child's formal education is a key element needed to reduce the opportunity gap for Black, American Indian, and all children of color. The opportunity gap, "unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities" (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014, para. 2) exists across multiple indicators including preschool enrollment, standardized test scores, and graduation rates, an indicator of poor performing schools and social context (Amselem, 2014). Preschool enrollment rates were highest for Asian 3–4-year-old children nationally (56%), followed by Black (53%), White (50%), American Indian (45%), Hispanic (43%), and Pacific Islander children (39%; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Standardized test scores, which of themselves are examples of structural and social inequities (Camara & Schmidt, 1999), are 30 points lower among American Indian/Alaska Native students, 26 points lower among Black students, and 23 points lower among Hispanic students compared to White students across the U.S. (de Brey et al., 2019). High school graduation rates remain disparate at 88.7% for non-Hispanic White youth and 72.8% for students of color (Amselem, 2014; Minnesota COMPASS, 2020). Early intervention to prevent opportunity gaps are cumulative. For example, low-income, African American children showed

stronger intellectual development and academic achievement from preschool intervention compared to elementary school intervention (Campbell & Ramey, 1994). In addition, early childhood education programs have been clearly linked to improved graduation rates, lower pregnancy rates in high school, and less involvement in the justice system (Duncan et al., 2014; Grunewald & Rolnick, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2007; Reynolds et al., 2001).

Parent engagement at school is, in our usage, an inclusive and diverse model where parents have multiple ways to be involved in their child's educational experience (Baker et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2010). Parent engagement in their child's education is independently associated with higher educational attainment, language skills, social competencies, income, health insurance rates, and lower justice involvement and substance abuse (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Reynolds et al., 2011) for all children (Ma et al., 2016).

Since parent engagement shows such substantial opportunities to improve long-term outcomes for children, why is parent engagement not universal? Walker et al. (2010) described a model of parent engagement that describes why parents get involved, the forms of involvement, and how parent involvement influences both proximal and distal child outcomes. Parent engagement should represent an inclusive model where parents have multiple ways to be involved in their child's educational experience including instilling their values, goals, aspirations and expectations, home-based activities, parent–teacher communication, and passive school engagement (volunteering) or active engagement including decision making roles related to their child's education at the school (Baker et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2010). These types of engagement are predicated on parent beliefs, perceptions of invitations from the school, and perceived life context (Walker et al., 2010). Parents who have low incomes may have competing demands and urgency of meeting basic needs (Arnold et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2017; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Mendez, 2010) while parents of children who come from immigrant families may have cultural expectations around school engagement and language barriers (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012; Johnson et al., 2016). For example, parent engagement in school can be restricted by social and structural barriers for low-income families including a general lack of financial resources, difficulty with transportation, stress related to living conditions, and employment stressors (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Povey et al., 2016).

The challenge is hardly simple. Systemic racism interferes with equitable learning opportunities among Black, American Indian, and children of color. African American, Latino, and low-income students are twice as likely to be taught by inexperienced and unqualified teachers (Flores, 2007). School districts educating a large population of African American and Latino students

receive less local and state funding compared to school districts serving a low number of students of color (Flores, 2007). Additionally, people of color are more likely to live in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. Racial residential segregation is associated with limited opportunities for high quality education and adequate employment and with a lack of access to quality health care (Bailey et al., 2017). Parent engagement, including family support in early education settings, is crucial for mitigating opportunity gaps for Black, American Indian, and families and children of color (Povey et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2011).

There are several approaches to increase parent engagement aimed at addressing educational inequity. Strengths-based strategies (Rubin et al., 2012), culturally responsive practices and programming (Griner & Stewart, 2013), and participatory approaches with community members (Rubin et al., 2012) all share a similar approach of shared ownership with stakeholders in a skill building and collaborative process to jointly contribute to the development, implementation, and evaluation of educational practice. The World Café is an approach that can be strengths-based, culturally responsive, and participatory while increasing parent motivation to engage and encouraging potential future involvement (Walker et al., 2010). Briefly, World Café is a conversational process with key systemic principles used to encourage participatory and collaborative dialogue (Thompson et al., 2014). The World Café process is adaptable and has been successfully implemented in a variety of circumstances and settings across the globe (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Previous applications of World Café have been used for community engagement and program development. Jor'dan et al. (2012) adapted the World Café method to provide peer-to-peer learning, discussion, and self-reflection around protective factors as part of a child abuse and neglect prevention initiative. Hechenbleikner et al. (2008) utilized the method to increase community engagement in local improvement plans in the city of Reading, Massachusetts.

This report from the field describes the implementation of a participatory, strengths-based approach to increase parent engagement in low-income, culturally centered early childhood Montessori education programs (Montessori Center of Minnesota, n.d.) using a parent-led World Café. Volunteer parent leaders from each of the five early childhood education programs (89% Black, American Indian, and children of color; 80% qualify for free or reduced lunch) participated in a flexible process to cultivate Black, American Indian, and person of color parent voice and engagement. The World Café approach was tailored to fit the school setting and cultural context of the families and community. The parent project, Serving the Whole Child, is a community–university partnership connecting health, early Montessori education,

and social services to optimize life opportunities for Black, American Indian, and children of color attending high quality, culturally focused Montessori early education programs. This report from the field will describe the project and partnership, the process of training parent leaders, the World Café implementation process and participation, and recommendations for use in school settings.

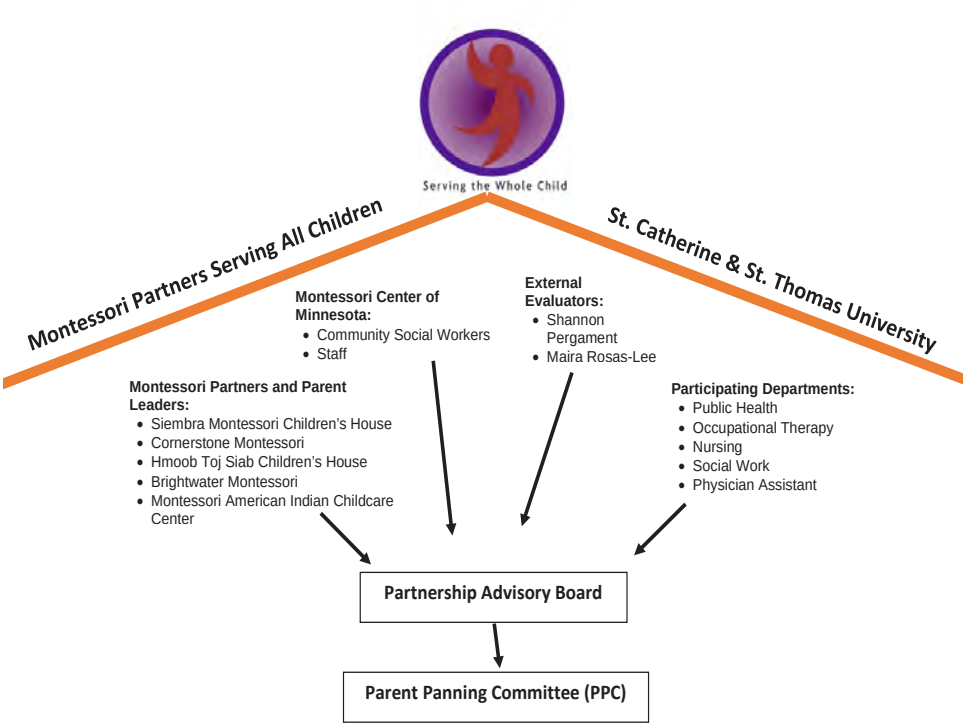
Serving the Whole Child

The Serving the Whole Child (SWC) community–university partnership and project began in 2013 between Montessori Partners Serving All Children (MPSAC) and St. Catherine University. See Figure 1 for an overview of SWC's structure. MPSAC is an outreach initiative of the Montessori Center of Minnesota (MCM) made up of a group of independent Montessori schools throughout the Twin Cities metro area, greater Minnesota, and South Dakota. Through this collaborative, partner schools provide high quality, community-led early childhood Montessori education for their culturally rooted communities and receive training, technical assistance, start up, and guidance for sustainability support from MCM (Montessori Center of Minnesota, n.d.). Montessori early education programs have demonstrated effectiveness in fostering noncognitive skills including self-discipline, critical reasoning and problem solving, improved bilingual language acquisition, increased preacademic and behavior skills with advantages in academic achievement in core subjects years after leaving the Montessori program (Debs & Brown, 2017).

Of the MPSAC collaborative, five independent, culturally rooted early childhood Montessori schools in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota opted to participate in SWC. The five schools included the cultural communities of Siembra Montessori, a Spanish/English dual-language program serving Latine[2] children (Centro Tyrone Guzman, 2019); Bright Water Montessori, an intentionally diverse school in North Minneapolis with 60% of students identifying as student of color and 40% identifying as White (Bright Water Montessori School, 2019); Montessori American Indian Childcare Center (MAICC), serving American Indian children (MAICC, 2013); Hmoob Toj Siab Children's House, a bicultural Hmong–English program serving Hmong children (Hmong American Partnership, 2020); and Cornerstone Montessori serving diverse children in East St. Paul (Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School, 2020). Each school had representation of the school lead and school guides (classroom teachers) on the SWC Advisory Board and were actively engaged in all program activities. St. Catherine University representation included public health, occupational therapy, social work (including St. Thomas University,

formerly a joint social work program with St. Catherine University), physician assistant, and nursing faculty and students over the course of the program.

Figure 1. Serving the Whole Child Structure



SWC's primary impact statement is "our children, families, and communities are physically, emotionally, intellectually, culturally, and spiritually strengthened to achieve their goals." In order to achieve the desired impact, the Advisory Board—comprised of MSPAC leaders, administration, parent representatives of each partner school, and St. Catherine/St. Thomas University faculty—collaboratively established goals and activities from an ecological framework (McLeroy et al., 1988). These include, (a) high quality early childhood Montessori education, early childhood assessment, screening, and early intervention; (b) parent agency, leadership, and engagement; and (c) improving the skills of future professionals by involving St. Catherine University students in early childhood screening, interprofessional collaborative practice, and dialogue of cultural humility.

Part of the SWC programming, parent enrichment activities were identified as a key to increasing parent agency, leadership, and engagement. Prior to Fall 2017, the approaches used to identify topics and implement events did

not include parents' collaboration. In Fall 2016, rather than rely on the school representatives to identify opportunities for parents, parents were invited to join the Advisory Board, recognizing there was a need to include representation of parent voices in designing and leading parent enrichment activities for a more responsive and reflective partnership. Up to two parents from each school volunteered to join the SWC Advisory Board. Parents received a modest honorarium for each meeting, plus childcare, transportation support, and a meal were provided. Parents participated in an orientation to SWC prior to attending the first advisory board meeting.

The World Café Process

A participatory approach led by school parents in partnership with schools was deemed best practice for parent engagement. A participatory World Café process can reduce barriers for parents who are from historically underserved communities (Rubin et al., 2012; Griner & Stewart, 2013) and allow them to engage in decision making in school offerings and processes (Baker et al., 2017), a key element in parent engagement (Walker et al., 2010).

World Café is a conversational process with key systemic principles used to encourage participatory and collaborative dialogue (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Thompson et al., 2014). The World Café method employs seven guiding principles including: (1) setting the context; (2) creating hospitable space; (3) exploring questions that matter; (4) encouraging everyone's contribution; (5) connecting diverse perspectives; (6) listening together for patterns and insights; and (7) sharing collective discoveries. The process begins with an overarching theme or question to be explored. In general, participants move through various rounds of café-style discussion in small groups of four or five people, physically rotating to the other tables and questions over the course of the session. A "table host" serves to communicate the topic of discussion from one group to the next, while other participants carry with them key themes and questions between the various conversations. Through the subsequent rounds of discussion, the themes and ideas begin to develop into a single, larger connected conversation. The conclusion of a World Café includes a period of town hall meeting-style conversation with the larger group to identify collective patterns, ideas, and potential areas for action (The World Café Community Foundation, 2005; Thompson et al., 2014). A World Café conversation is based on the assumption that communities have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges (Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

Parent Planning Committee Process

The Parent Planning Committee (PPC) included one to two parent leaders from each of the five schools (total of seven parent leaders), two university partners, and two MCM partners, and it was facilitated by two external partnership evaluators. The external partnership evaluators were part of the Advisory Board and were invited to be part of this process based on their past experience with facilitating World Café events. The PPC met twice per month for five months, for two to three hours per meeting, to plan and implement the activities for the World Café events. An interpreter was present when needed. Principles of community-based participatory practice were adhered to throughout the PPC process, including building trust across the team, and engaging in mutual respect, shared decision-making, shared power, and co-learning (Israel et al., 1998). Parent leaders were paid a modest stipend for their involvement, and dinner and childcare were provided at all PPC meetings.

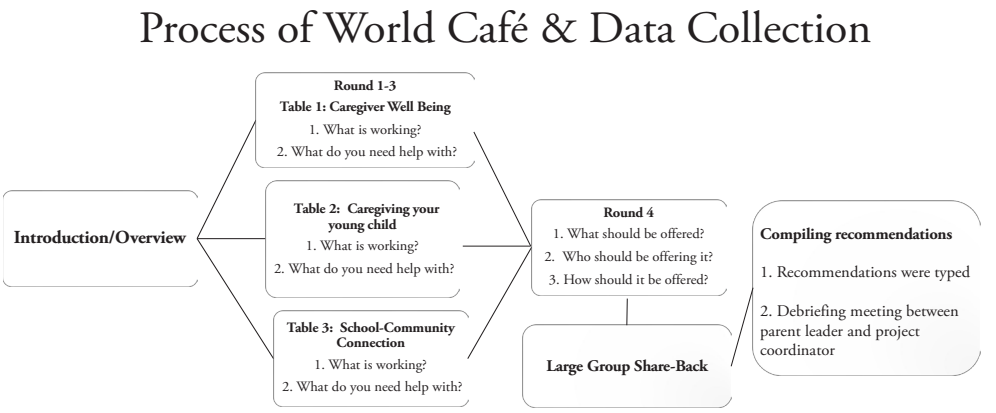
The parent leaders were given an in-depth overview of the World Café approach and planned the content of the World Café events, including the World Café agenda, roles, topics, and questions. Parent planning team members were given a World Café host training, and they practiced facilitation of the World Café questions by role-playing with fellow PPC team members as facilitators, notetakers, and participants. The team developed recruitment strategies and recruitment materials for their individual schools and collaborated with their school leadership to recruit, set event dates, and work through logistics.

Each school held one World Café during the spring/summer lasting up to three hours including a meal. The main structure (see Figure 2) for the World Cafés included three key topics (1 per table), and two key questions per table. Parent participants rotated through three initial discussion rounds where the topic at each table was either (1) parent well-being, (2) parenting your young child, or (3) school–community connection. The topics were determined by the PPC intentionally to give parents voice to the type and nature of parent engagement activities. At each table, parents were asked to discuss two key questions for the topic at that table. The key questions were (1) What is working well for you? and (2) What do you need help with? The first question was designed to identify existing parent and school assets that could potentially be built upon as a way for parents and schools to learn from each other. The second question was intended to identify how the schools and SWC could build a parent program that meets parents' self-identified needs.

During the fourth round, participants stayed at their current table, reviewed the full body of notes taken during Rounds 1–3, and answered the following three additional questions about future parent engagement activities at their school: (1) Of all the ideas generated at this table on this topic, what should

be offered? (2) Who should be offering it? (3) How should it be offered? After Round 4, the parents convened in a large group and summarized the ideas generated at each table. All of the notes taken throughout the event by parents and the summarized ideas were collected and transcribed by both parent leaders and coordinators, approximately two hours per school. This served as qualitative data from the World Café for the PPC. A week after each event, a debriefing meeting was scheduled between parent leaders and coordinators to reflect on the event and add to the recommendations as appropriate. Finally, all of the qualitative data was brought back to the PPC for analysis (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. World Café Approach



Process for Collaborative Analysis of World Café Dialogues

Analysis of the World Café discussions took place over two months (12 hours total) and utilized a collaborative analysis approach in which all members of the PPC team analyzed the qualitative results together. PPC team members read the qualitative data (notes and summaries) and identified overarching topics for each school independently and across all schools (see Table 1 for topics across all schools). The analysis and interpretation happened in real time using flip charts and marker boards to identify topics. Topics were finalized by group consensus and prioritized. Prioritization was done by the PPC by consensus and responding to three questions: (1) Which are the priorities/areas that multiple schools share? (2) Is the priority urgent? If not urgent, how long can it wait? (3) How do the recommendations map onto the goals of the SWC partnership?

Table 1. Common Topics Identified by Parents Across Schools From the World Café Events

Parent Well-Being	Parenting a Young Child	School–Community Connection
• Offer opportunities for parent/family social connectedness/*Me time* • Increase communication and/or information about variety of resources	• Nutrition and meal planning • Engaging children in activities • Montessori 101 for parents	• Increase school–parent communication

Once the findings were analyzed and prioritized, the external evaluators drafted summaries of the results for the PPC to review and finalize prior to presenting it back to the Advisory Board (1 month). The PPC then generated five key questions for the Partnership Advisory Board to consider (2 hours). Of each of the prioritized topics identified for each school site, the following questions were created:

1. What is feasible or doable? Is something like this already happening at a school (that could be replicated)?
2. How do each of the recommendations align with the partnership goals?
3. Which are themes the partnership could sponsor (provide resources for)?
4. Which are themes the schools could sponsor without SWC support?
5. How will these be implemented and evaluated?

The Advisory Board reviewed the prioritized topics from the school sites and identified key strategies and action steps with each school. The final action plan for each school included original parent recommendations from the World Cafés, analysis, prioritization from the PPC, and input from the Partnership Advisory Board.

Tailoring the World Café

To honor each school's unique community, parent leaders tailored the World Café approach to fit their cultural values and families' needs. One parent leader from each school was asked to respond to two questions via email including details about their outreach, recruitment, set-up, and culturally responsive adjustments of the event, facilitation, and implementation. The two questions included: (1) What did you do? and (2) Why did you do it that way? Specific reasons given related to cultural traditions, how many people were there, and practices or processes that were already created at their school (see Table 2 for parent leader responses). All five schools participated. Attendees of the World

Café events included seven parent leaders, five partnership volunteers to assist with logistics, and 58 school parents. Parent leaders described their World Café event process and how the event was tailored to meet the needs of the parents and school. The World Cafés were held in the common language of the participants with additional interpreters provided as necessary. Recruitment varied from sending a flyer to one-on-one invitations to parents as they picked up their child. Two schools chose to use an already scheduled family meeting night. Implementation differed by school. Two schools chose to facilitate the World Café in one group, rather than three small tables, as was consistent with their collectivistic cultural practices. Parent leaders explained the process, introduced the topics and discussion questions, and clarified questions parents posed about the process.

What Were the Main Messages From Parents?

Consistently, all five schools indicated a positive response from the parents including the value that each parent was not alone in their struggles, as well as the need for additional programming and an increase in attendance at future school-sponsored events. These responses are consistent with key models of parent engagement including parent motivation and opportunities for options for involvement described by Walker et al. (2010) and creating learning communities that are "family friendly" as described by Epstein (2010). Parent leaders shared their own reflections of their experiences and the World Café process as summarized in Figure 3. These reflections were gathered from the two questions answered via email. Parent leaders also shared common barriers faced across schools including challenges in finding a time for parents to attend the World Café and general challenges in getting the word out to parents.

The parent notes and recommendations from the World Café were compiled based on the topics presented at the event. Common topics identified across schools after the analysis are displayed in Table 1. Again, the topics align with parent desire for more and better communication from the school, a variety of engagement opportunities with the school, and improving parenting skills and resources while acknowledging life context (Walker et al., 2010). The common topics were then prioritized for each school community, and after input received from the Partnership Advisory Board, each school developed enrichment events in response to the results gathered from the World Café events. A total of 20 parent enrichment events were hosted with an average of four events per school. Some schools chose to design a series of parent events such as "Nutrition Series," "Parent Wellness," "Self-Compassion: Taking care of ourselves so we can keep being great parents," and "Traditional Indian Parenting." Additional topics included "Social–Emotional Development," "Parent Me Time Spa Day," "Food Making," and "Minnesota Hmong Day."

Table 2. Parent Leader Descriptions of Tailoring Café Approach to Each School

Outreach & Recruitment	"We started working with teachers to plan for World Café, got dates on calendar. We decided on a Friday afternoon." -Siembra "With a strong focus on families, we decided to put on the World Café to see how the families in our school were doing with everyday challenges that surround parenting, in the hopes to identify opportunities the school could best support parents, and in doing so, ways that would be more meaningful. In the World Café, my role was to plan and coordinate and host. I coordinated with school administration to pick and choose the event date, marketed, and worked with supporting staff to finalize other details regarding supplies and catering. We were right. The World Café event that was rescheduled for the beginning of the next school year was a success. We had approximately 9–12 RSVPs. We decided to have the starting time for the event immediately after picking up time, so parent wouldn't have to leave and return; we knew traffic would be one of the biggest issues." -Cornerstone "We passed out the final questions that the collaborative effort came up with to parents who could not attend. We did this in order to involve their voices in this process." -MAICC "My husband helped, he created the flyers. Learned how to draw parents, what methods worked, what did not work. I found out that before the World Café parents did not know what was going on. During the World Café parents said that was the most effective method: personal, one-on-one invitation. During the round table, parents were not shamed, they were vulnerable, they shared their needs, shared being overwhelmed. I was surprised in a good way. I was really honored to be on board." -Brightwater
Set-Up & Culturally Responsive Adjustments	"We conducted the World Café because we wanted to understand the needs of our families. When the opportunity of the World Café was presented, although I did not know how it was going to work, we were excited to do it, and it was done. It was done that way because we were from different cultures and different races. It was the best way to connect as a family." -Siembra "We chose to host the World Café during one of our regularly scheduled monthly Parent Nest events. We hosted the event as a Talking Circle to gather information from parents about their ideal needs and wants regarding parent leadership, participation, programming, and activities." -MAICC "A traditional World Café model involves individuals switching tables every 15 to 20 minutes and getting introduced to a topic of discussion at their new table by a 'table host.' We chose to do a circle discussion for our small group instead. Hmoob Toj Siab's parent representatives and staff came together to plan for and facilitate a World Café at the school and to collect data that would be used to prioritize parent engagement activities themed to address the needs of the school and families." -HTS "We chose the lunchroom for the food which ended up being where our childcare was and worked out perfectly being that it could quickly convert to a Gym! The room we chose for the parents to convene was one of the largest rooms due to the initial amount of RSVPs. Also, the beauty and natural lighting of the room as well…. The room was a classroom which was perfect since the parents could see the beautiful Montessori environment their children spend each day in. There were no cultural reasons, only beauty, relaxed natural sunlight through the large windows, beautiful Montessori materials all around, and the space accommodation." -Brightwater

Table 2, Continued

Facilitation/Implementation	"During the World Café families began to say what they needed and what they didn't need. First, the questions were presented. It was very frustrating for us to answer the questions because we did not know how to answer. When we saw the confused faces of each person, we reviewed the questions with them one more time and that, how it was done. Step by step, families felt good answering the questions step by step, although there was not enough time. But we were able to get answers to the questions which were very good answers. It was interesting to see; all the answers to all the needs were taken into account. These were the most important for us and our children, and that made us feel that we were important for the school. This process let us talk and express the feelings of each one even though we were one of the schools that asked for bigger things like adding more grade levels to the current school or providing busing services. We all know that it is not impossible that over time it will be done….I observe parents were open to share their feelings. Questions were hard for them. They asked themselves, 'Am I really serving my child as a whole?' We touch the center of their heart. They started talking and connecting with each other. We were in confidence and were able to overcome their fear of speaking up." -Siembra "I was a bit anxious with the thought of hosting, at first. As parents arrived, my anxiety subsided. All the parents were amazing and engaged in the event from beginning to end. Everyone had great ideas. They were very receptive to the thought of the event and wanted to know what more they could do." -Cornerstone "We chose the Talking Circle over the World Café process, because it is a deeply rooted traditional practice in the Native American community. A Talking Circle begins with saging oneself and/or a prayer. Members sit in a circle to consider a problem or a question. The tradition Circle invites a respectful environment that encourages inclusion and participation." -MAICC "Unfortunately, we had a small group (7 parents and 3 staff in attendance only) for our first World Café event and felt it would have been more efficient to use a circle communication style rather than moving from table to table. To put it into perspective, the World Café (circle communication style) that HTS used involved parents who sat in a circle for topic discussions. The discussion topics were led by two hosts who took turn hosting: one was an HTS staff, and the other was a parent representative. Instead of moving from one table to the next, the circle discussions went in order from one topic to the next while sitting in a circle. Any suggestions or recommendations that came out of the discussions were written on a sticky note and posted on the wall for each topic. Names were not written or mentioned on any of the sticky notes, so parents didn't feel voicing their opinions were limited or constricted in anyway." -HTS

Figure 3. Parent Leaders' Reflections of World Café Experience and Process

"My experience was successful….We had more parents participating than any other events, but it was more work. It helped me gain trust with other parents. I have decided to continue in this partnership and the school, even if my kids are moving to another school. I am proud and have motivated other parents to participate in WC and other projects….But what excites me most [are] things that were promised in the World Café are already [being] done. For instance, there is more information about health and other issues. For us, it makes us feel that we are important and are listened to. The work was not put aside, and we were able to express our needs and continue on the project so that we have everything we asked for. We know that it is not easy, but everything will take place just as time goes by, and there will be opportunities to accomplish each need expressed during the World Café." -Siembra

"During our practice WC, I learned I am not alone on my struggles being a parent. My school supports me, and the partnership support the school. I am not alone, and my fear of my kids' future. The school and the partnership care too much, money goes into this partnership and toward my families. Good to know my voice matters. The data we got, firsthand, it was from the parents mouth; it's not secondary research data. This is coming from home, and there is going to be done something about it." -Cornerstone

"I am new to this; I did not know what to expect. I learned that it brought families together and brought topics we should not be ashamed of talking about." -MAICC

"Hosting HTS's first World Café has allowed the school to increase parent involvement on so many levels. We saw our monthly parent engagement events go from 5 to 7 parents attending in the past to now 16–20 parents attending. This number is great considering HTS only serves up to 30 families at any given time. The parent representatives talked about how being involved in the World Café process has given them an opportunity to hone their public speaking skills and communication skills. The children look forward to spending quality time with parents during parent engagement events and have such a great attitude towards learning. Overall, the parent-to-school relationship has become more of a community and stronger than previous years." -HTS

"What went well at the World Café was the parents were very appreciative of a venue in which to have a voice. There was plenty of food. Free childcare was provided with plenty of space for children to decide amongst the different activities, whether it was drawing, scooters, or simply shooting some hoops. The parents were very enthusiastic as they participated in rotated table discussions. When asked what drew them, they said a live person's warm invitation. Being that I was that person, I replied, 'it was like going fishing,' and they all burst into laughter. They said, 'it worked thank you!'" -Brightwater

Considerations for Parent Engagement Using a World Café Approach

The World Café was a successful process for both developing parent leaders and providing an opportunity for parent voice in enhanced parent engagement in early childhood Montessori programs. The strengths of this approach included the participatory process, schools' adaptability to the recommendations, and tailoring for each school site to accommodate cultural preferences.

Schools were able to effectively use the findings to implement school programming and parents felt positive about the approach and offerings.

There are barriers and limitations to the project presented. Participatory processes are time intensive, from the trainings to the implementation and through the analysis. The process took nine months, given the complexities of arranging meetings and collaborative development and analysis. Committed school leadership is necessary to encourage parents to hold the events and integrate the plans into the school calendar within the school's budget and time constraints. Schools implementing on their own will likely be more expedient; however, schools do need to allow adequate time. One school faced additional barriers because the school had undergone a series of rapid turnover in leadership resulting in gaps in the administration which occupied the capacity of the school leadership. Two schools included both early education programs and elementary Montessori schools. When specifically tailoring to early childhood, these two schools were concerned about offering programming for a specific age range that was not open to all parents given resource constraints. Research shows parent engagement in the preschool years is even more effective than in the elementary years (Campbell & Ramey, 1994). Whatever school activities occur, it is vital to have targeted programming for children in early childhood or preschool programming.

Another barrier to engagement is parent capacity. Two of the five schools indicated difficulties in arranging the World Café and having adequate parent interest. Specifically, low-income parents, parents of color, and American Indian families may face additional barriers, including resources and mental health (Arnold et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2017; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Mendez, 2010). The literature consistently highlights scheduling conflicts being a significant barrier to parent engagement activities (Arnold et al., 2008; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Mendez, 2010). Surprisingly, the same authors reported parents feeling depressed or stressed, yet scheduling was considered a more substantial barrier to engagement than their reported mental health (Arnold et al., 2008; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Mendez, 2010). Schools must collaborate with parent leaders to strategize approaches and offer a variety of options for parents to be engaged.

Schools also face barriers to providing comprehensive parent engagement opportunities, including budget, priorities, and time. Schools need a systematic process like the World Café to understand what is going well for children, parents, and schools and to identify what gaps exist. Inclusive parent engagement includes four key features: (1) parent engagement is reciprocal, not merely filling a need the school requests; (2) parent engagement is relational, and trust is required for parents to speak and be heard; (3) parent engagement is culturally

and linguistically responsive; and (4) parent engagement if responsive to the needs and encompassing of the strengths of the families (Georgis et al., 2014). The MPSAC schools have excelled at the relational and culturally/linguistically responsive elements. The schools are culturally centered, and the staff represents the families' communities. The use of World Café allows the schools to hear from parents about ways they can engage and build upon community strengths to meet self-identified needs. In addition, it provides an opportunity for the school to listen—not that parents are unable to learn, but perhaps the school's communication approach is ineffective (Baker et al., 2017).

Finally, early childhood programs with the strongest long-term outcomes provide a range of services and support. Many programs provide parent education sessions to increase skills, build social support, build relationships with the school/teachers, and guide parents on how to educationally support their child (Arnold et al., 2008; Mendez, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2011). Parents from historically marginalized communities may require other resources including housing, food, healthcare access, or other basic human needs. Social workers at the schools can provide those resources and referrals. SWC was intentionally designed to provide comprehensive health, education, and community support services to families. To complement this support, the use of the World Café has the potential to enhance parent engagement and parent–school communication with the long-term goal of reducing the opportunity gap.

The World Café process had several limitations. It is impossible to correlate the successful implementation of the World Café to any changes in parent agency, participation in engagement activities, or changes in overall parent engagement because there were only a small proportion of parents that engaged in leadership and attended the events. There is also no information on the success or impact of the parent engagement events in terms of perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, or behaviors that may have changed due to this process or on parents' ability to effectively support children at the school and at home. The participatory process of the World Café did provide voice and leadership opportunities to the parents who participated, but this was limited to only a few parents. The facilitation of the World Café may have inadvertently limited the solutions to focus on parent engagement rather than broader opportunities including governance. This process also does not address the social and structural factors that influence the opportunity gap. Given repeated iterations of the World Café, it is possible that parents will strive to make larger social and structural changes for the parent enrichment activities, including advocacy, organizing, or information on influencing policy development. Finally, SWC was grant funded, providing financial support for incentives, meals, transportation, and childcare. However, schools can do a World Café on a very limited

budget, using creative strategies such as potluck meals, rotation of childcare volunteering, and ride-shares.

The continued opportunity gap for Black, American Indian, and children of color is intolerable. Schools, parents, community organizations, and other institutions need to build partnerships using participatory processes to identify strengths, needs, and solutions to address the seemingly intractable challenges. The World Café is a participatory strategy that can support parent leadership and engagement. The World Café balances power and decision-making while being flexible to meet the cultural values and practices of the school. School administrative support is necessary to encourage the World Café process, integrate ideas into school calendars, and to provide resources in terms of space and supplies at a minimum. Although in this particular case, parent engagement was largely limited to parent- and child-centered practices, the World Café process has the potential to tackle the structural and social factors that underlie the opportunity gap. Future research should focus on assessing child, parent, community, and system change that results from such participatory approaches using rigorous design to strengthen the evidence for this approach.

Endnotes

[1]MAICC has chosen to self-identify as American Indian. For this reason, American Indian will be used throughout the paper to honor and respect the community's choice.

[2]Centro Tyrone Guzman has chosen to use "e" in place of the Spanish language masculine "o" to include all people.

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