

# Culturally-Specific Family Learning Circles

Partnering for Racial Equity  
Research Practice Partnership  
Research Protocol

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Learning Circles are similar to focus groups in broad structure but they differ in that they:

- Position educators and researchers as learners who gain knowledge, insights, and understandings from Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian Americans or Pacific Islander families and those who experience marginalization (e.g. families whose children have disabilities, speak languages other than English, are LGBTQ+);
- Encourage families to engage collectively as a circle with each other to share their stories and experiences and surface possible solutions together;
- Tap the expertise and networks of community leaders;
- Cultivate culturally-specific community-centered space that do not center white-dominant agendas and expectations.

Learning Circles also position hosts as answerable to the families who share their experiences:

- Systems actors have a responsibility to honor the voices of those in the circle by checking interpretations, sharing & using their data responsibly to improve systems, and being accountable to families for those efforts.
- Hosts explicitly describe how they will take up action based on what they learned, report back on their actions & changes, and provide opportunities for future participation.
- Learning circles might be a step towards co-design processes in which families are part of decision-making.



*Conventional approaches to family engagement and data collection can reinforce racial inequities in schools. These approaches operate within a white, normative, school-centric paradigm that reinforces the status quo and hinders meaningful collaboration with nondominant families (Ishimaru et al., 2018). Even when family engagement efforts are undertaken with a sincere desire to attend to family voice, these approaches often occur without acknowledging the legacies of mistrust and racism experienced by nondominant families and position them as needy clients or beneficiaries, rather than experts on their own and their children's teaching and learning (Ishimaru et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2020; Jefferson, 2015; Patel, 2015; Smith, 2013). Nondominant families, through their stories, lived experiences, can provide valuable "funds of knowledge" towards more equitable school practices and processes (Ishimaru et al., 2015, 2018).*



## Planning

- A. Write out the **purpose** of the learning circle, proposed structure/logistics, the rationale for the particular community you seek to learn from and what you will do with the data and learning (note: listening is not sufficient).
  - Plan to hold at least two sessions. The second session is for accountability purposes so that families have an opportunity to hear about what was done with the data, offer new insights or feedback and explore future participation.
  - If families speak a language other than English, the learning circles should be conducted entirely in that language and any interpretation should be for the monolingual English speakers.
- B. Partner with a Community-Based Organization (CBO) or Family/Community Leader
  - Identify a CBO or family/community leader in your school who has existing relationships with particular groups of parents and families you hope to learn from.
  - Discuss with partner(s) the purpose and proposed structure.
  - The partner(s) invites the families and determines scheduling & whether to host the sessions in-person at a community gathering location where those families feel most comfortable (expecting families to come to the school is often still centering the school's agenda) or via an electronic platform (Zoom or Teams).
  - The partner(s) determines whether families should be encouraged to include their children or other adults in the session. They can also determine whether to send consent forms and a summary document in advance to participants.
  - Plan to pay both the partner(s) and families stipends for their participation.
- C. Draft few, open-ended **questions** that begin with family priorities and experiences.
  - Script the opening and introductions to enable families to begin by sharing the **brilliance** of their children
  - Do not solely ask questions about "needs" -- also ask what they are already doing and what they already have.
  - Send proposed questions to partner for feedback & improvement.
  - Invite families to be frank about their experiences and explicitly recognize that racism & oppression exist in schools (avoiding asking about race/racism signals it is not ok to talk about it)

## Examples:

- A. **Purpose:** The African American Families Learning Circles are part of a broader effort by the district to improve how we listen to and are influenced by voices & priorities of Black families.
- B. **Partnership:** We identified a CBO with established relationships with families we wanted to reach and had a conversation with the director on who would lead the conversation about the aims of the effort. We created a summary sheet of the purpose of the learning circles so the director had it in writing. We also sent the director a draft of the questions for feedback and adjusted the questions based on the director's feedback. The director also determined that it was better to only include adults in the learning circle and not the children.
- C. **Sample Questions**
  1. Please introduce yourself, pronouns you use, age of your child or children, the schools they attend, and one amazing thing about your children.
  2. How did you experience remote learning this spring?
  3. Outside the learning your child(ren) were doing for school, how else has your family been learning in the last few months?
  4. What are your priorities for your child's learning this coming year?
  5. What challenges/issues did you experience, especially as families of Black boys?

\*If you are a researcher, remember to provide IRB informed consent to participants.



## During the Learning Circle

- A. The partner(s) welcomes everyone and facilitates the entire discussion.
- B. Opening & Introductions:
  - Each person helping to host (family leader, district staff, CBO leader, university researcher) introduces themselves, with the district leader, in particular, **owning shortcomings** of prior engagement or data collection efforts.
  - The partner(s) shares purpose of Learning Circles & how the data will be used and leaves space for any questions from families
  - Ask for permission to be recorded: Turn on recording after each family member consents to being recorded (audio and/or video).
  - The partner asks that families maintain confidentiality of the group to hold space for each other collectively.
- C. The partner asks questions as they see fit & invites families into conversation.
  - This is **NOT** a time for educators or researchers to respond
- D. Adhere to the timeline and ask for permission to extend the session if it goes over (as the partner(s) determines).
- E. End by thanking participants, reiterating followup to expect, and explicitly addressing the importance of what families shared.

## Examples:

- B. **District Leader Introduction:** The district leader acknowledged that the school district had not done well in listening and learning, especially from Black families. They named their role as rebuilding and restoring trust and situated the Learning Circle as one small effort towards that end. They also acknowledged that their words alone were insufficient; the district would have to prove those commitments through its subsequent actions.
- **Researcher Introduction:** The researcher should share a brief “why” of their presence and research related to their commitments.
- C. The Learning Circle was facilitated through Zoom. All the questions were written in the chat box so families could read them.
- D. The CBO leader expressed how rich the conversation was and acknowledged that the Learning Circle had reached the end of the scheduled time. The leader let families know that it was ok to leave and opened the space for families to continue discussing. One family left and the rest stayed.







## Follow-Up After the Circle

- Review the transcript from the recording to ensure it accurately captures what people said.
- Engage multiple people in analyzing and making sense of the data, including CBO and/or family/community leaders, if possible.
- Send a summary to the partner(s) and families drawing directly from their words. Seek feedback to ensure that families feel that they are being accurately represented.
- Follow through on using the data to inform deliberations/decisions.
- Get feedback from the partner(s) about the first circle and plan for the next session.

## Example:

**Follow-Up:** After the researchers reviewed the transcript from the learning circle and identified themes, the district leaders and university researchers met to discuss those themes. A summary was then generated that discussed each theme. Quotes were also included in the summary. The document was then sent to the families who participated, CBO leader, and district leaders for feedback to ensure that the content aligned with what the families shared.



Learning Circles were designed by Ann Ishimaru (Principal Investigator), Niral Shah and Filiberto Barajas-López.

Additional Resources:

[Building Educational Justice and Community Well-Being with Families and Communities Policy Memo](#)

[Centering Black Families and Justice-Focused Educators during Remote Schooling Report](#)

[Community Cafe Tools](#)

[Families and Communities in Curriculum Co-Design](#)

[Family Leadership Design Collaborative](#)

## References

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