



Co-Design Activity Rooted in Family Ecologies The River of Life

Connected to Solidarity-Driven Co-Design Work

Families and communities narrate their lived experiences within the educational system. By building from families' histories, epistemologies, and lived experiences, rather than from the agenda and priorities of schools, we can begin to catalyze more transformative possibilities towards educational justice and collective action.

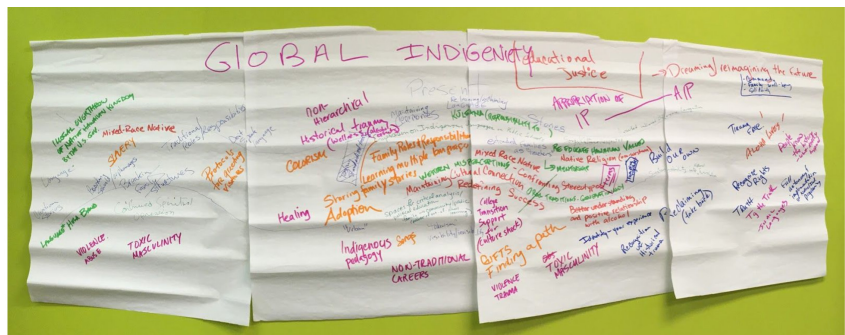
ACTIVITY PURPOSE

The River of Life activity provides an approach to sharing one's self and the people, histories, priorities, challenges, and opportunities that have shaped them.

The activity takes folks to a deeper place of learning that goes beyond typical first-time introductions and standard school-construct conversations over achievement, discipline, and school experiences.

The River of Life activity allows for the conversations to be shared and heard across time. Revisiting the group's words when new people join the group allows for family ecologies to be the focus throughout the process. Keep the written words posted at each session.

Example
of River of
Life from
the Chicago
design team.



CREATING OPTIMAL LEARNING CONDITIONS

Create a learning space that allows people to see and hear one another easily. This activity intentionally moves away from “business-as-usual” and creates a new introductory approach that humanizes relationship building. Facilitators should plan for language supports such as interpreters and document translations.

POTENTIAL TENSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- The scripted tool may move toward closure and predetermined outcomes sooner than the group has fully explored their lived experiences.
- Multiple truths may emerge which may require the facilitator to encourage non-closure and allow for discomfort.
- Those who have historically been granted positional power may need encouragement to be still and listen as the facilitator works to create equal power amongst all.

MATERIALS & SUPPLIES

- IN-PERSON: Butcher paper, Post-It notes, blank sheets of paper, markers, tape.
 - » Best when participants sit in a circle(s) around a table(s).
- VIRTUAL: Plan ahead for Break out rooms and digital whiteboard.

Activity

The River of Life is a visual conceptual tool that helps groups build a collective narrative across conversations about building a just, equitable society. Participants engage in a social dreaming practice rooted in past and present histories that helps those who have come together to create and envision a future toward community well-being.

The protocol engages diverse communities in a collective process of sharing family ecologies, co-creating new meaning, and generating actions toward an imagined racially equitable future.

Participants

- share stories and identify common experiences,
- discuss and reflect on the current challenges and opportunities,
- and imagine future pathways and measures that matter to community and family well-being.

LEARNING PROTOCOL

Facilitator's Role: There are many options to this activity and the uniqueness of each group should help to inform the facilitator on the best approach.

Creating the Space

- Ask people to set aside their titles
- Make sure that everyone can hear and see one another
- Encourage people to set aside any grammar or artist expectancies
- Reinforce the importance of participation at your comfort level

OPTION A: GUIDED BY PROMPTS

- Provide a long blank piece of chart paper and divide the chart into three sections: past, present, and future
- Guide people through a set of prompts. After each prompt, provide ample time for people to write and/or draw their thoughts. Give time for everyone to share their thoughts with at least 1 other person before asking for whole group sharing.
 - **PROMPT 1:** What are the current needs, strengths, challenges, and opportunities for educational justice?
 - **PROMPT 2:** What has contributed to, created, and shaped your thoughts about the opportunities and challenges for educational justice or injustice?
 - **PROMPT 3:** What dreams and possibilities to hold for the future of your communities?
- Once there has been time for reflection and conversation, provide a whole group listening and sharing opportunity. Ask people to share one or two things that resonated with what they heard from each other's stories. This could be similarities, striking differences, or surprises.

OPTION B:

Instead of a layering of prompts. Put the chart paper and markers in the middle of the table. Have the group gather the paper and ask them to draw/write their stories about their own experiences related to educational justice or injustice.

CLOSING

Provide opportunities for individuals to share with the group. Go for as long as it takes until everyone who wanted to share has had the opportunity. Summarize the activity by having participants describe what they notice about disrupting status-quo and what the river is helping them imagine for future pathways toward creating collective action for community and family well-being.

REFERENCES

Banks A, Catone K, Ishimaru A, Rabkin S, Scarlett K, and Saleem Z, January 2023, Spencer Foundation Grant Report; Measures that Matter: Building and Measuring the Equitable, Anti-Racist Education of the Future: a trans-disciplinary, intergenerational conference experience.

Bang M & Ishimaru A, October 2019, TRANSFORMING THE FIELD OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT Co-designing Research, Practices, and Measures for Educational Justice and Community Wellbeing FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE.