Bridging the Empathy Gap:
Networked Communities to Address Social Inclusion for Immigrant Children and Youth

Roundtable Discussions

Following the presentations at the Bridging the Empathy Gap Convening, eight round table conversations took place to identify defining topics and gauge interest and pathways to potential collaborations, considering challenges, opportunities as well as possible next steps. The conversations were fluid, wide-ranging and engaged suggesting a need and longing for further work in this domain.

The following questions were posed:

- What did you find most exciting or inspiring and what do you think are some defining problems we should address collaboratively?
- Where do you see potential for collaborations?
- What would be the next steps for making some of these collaborations come to fruition?
- What are foreseeable challenges for sustaining this collaborative work and how might we overcome them?
- Who else should be at the table?

Designated facilitators led the discussions and notetakers tracked the key discussion points from each of the 8 conversations and each conversation was also audio-recorded. Participants at the table were also provided a Venn diagram to map out potential points of convergence. These summative notes are a compilation of the themes that emerged from these conversations.

Shared Excitement
~ There was effervescence in the room. Participants shared their excitement to be having collaborative conversations across various sectors who work with immigrant populations as there is a keen awareness of the siloed nature of much of our work. Each sector that had not heard of the work of others was excited to learn of the work being done by others and to think about how they could strengthen their own. The inclusion of creatives (artists), youth leaders, educators, and researchers added unique depth, vibrancy and potentiality to the conversations.

~ Additionally, participants were excited to be a part of the conversations about shifting the narrative around immigrant children and youth away from a deficit gap to one of resilience.

~ There was interest in focusing on the “unentrenched persuadable” specifically by using information, new media, and social media to educate and change minds. As Will Peréz noted, “People have these deeply entrenched misconceptions.” This is a particular space where all of the nodes of the network—researchers, youth, creative, and educators, could collaborate particularly effectively to make change.

~ The topic of empathy captured both interest and optimism. As Fred Frelow said, “[Despite the] hate, misunderstanding, and Othering [in the world]... weaving a conversation about what is happening and what we can do about it, seems possible.” It begins with research-as Adam Strom asks, “We need to better understand why people are threatened by difference... why does difference become to be seen as a threat?” Changing the narrative from threat and Othering to empathy and inclusion requires creatives, researchers, activists, teachers and allies to articulate an organic, carefully curated and purposeful theory of change. It is a topic where we need to employ both facts (to bust myths) and empathy (through narratives and creative strategies) to actively break down the divide. We need to create a generation of “empathy gap warriors.”

**Potential for Collaborations**

Across all tables, participants agreed that youth have to be at the center of the conversation. As Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, noted immigrant youth and youth advocacy organizations “have developed the architecture, language, and agency [of change]... [this is at] the heart of democracy.” As such there was an agreement that whatever projects we embarked on should encourage collaborations between youth and communities of researchers, educators, artists, and activists. Whether we conducted Participatory (Youth) Action Research (PYAR) and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), which enable researchers and youth (and members of the community) to work together to capture youths’ (and community members’) voices, as one participant succinctly stated, “See them [immigrant youth] as active agents of research.”

Additionally, participants also discussed utilizing research methodologies to ensure researchers are working with youth and community members directly to have an accurate representation
representation of their different stories and identities. Storytelling (narratives, artwork, artwork, and the like) were viewed as a powerful instruments for a number of reasons. They empower youth to agency. In "telling their tales" (Garcia Marquez) they pivot from silence and shame to voice and pride. The “telling of tales” does the Freireian work of conscientização as the youth come to hear their own lives in the tales of others. By allowing them to recount their stories it provide distance and a recounting that allows young people to undergo posttraumatic growth (R.Tedeschi). It is a means of informing teachers and other service service providers of who they are serving. It is a way of letting members from different communities who share spaces to learn to understand one another to bridge the empathy gap. Further, it is a way to bridge the empathy gap for voters and policy makers. Well done it s a a way to examine parallels across history and across nation spaces and it can serve to normalize the experience. Thus getting us closer to empathy’s gold standard: There but for the grace of God go I.

Participants emphasized that “social media is the future” and we need to think of ways to leverage these new and powerful tools. Some mentioned creating apps such as the Voices of Immigrant Americans (VIA) for storytelling and other interactive digital platforms for immigrant and non-immigrant communities to engage in a sensible dialogue and to educate the public and purposely focus on persuadables. Additionally, it is also important to create digital archives where different community-based partners curate works, activities, and perspectives on immigrant youth and immigrant issues. Information on such issues could also be shared on traditional media; “popular Latinx television networks,” for example. Others emphasized the need to create access points; for example, one participant stated that connecting community colleges with primary and secondary schools could assist immigrant youth. New, more democratic, models of connected mentoring (see below) hold real promise. Further, researchers should also seek ways to actively engage youth in this process and allow youth to identify issues (problems in their communities related to immigration) and to represent them creatively, and to work closely with scholars to address their issues and ways to solve the problem (either be through research and/or art). Creating research programs that integrate art is essential because it allows individuals to find a way to articulate voice; it gives agency to youth and members of the community. Art is another powerful language to speak to persuadables.

Participants also discussed the role of connected mentoring. Building mentorship programs programs with help of scholars, creatives, and youth/community is promising indeed. Participants also talked about how making mentoring more intentional in everyday interactions with community members (not just teachers) might be beneficial for immigrant youth and the community at large. Others emphasized that mentoring could assist in developing youths’ social capital, meanwhile, indicating that mentoring could also be a mutual process: “I love the idea of mentoring as bi-dimensional. Both the youth and the mentor is mentored. We need to share this idea more widely.” It is also important to establish programs
to help immigrant youth recruit their own mentors and learn how to gain access to much needed social capital.

When thinking about inclusion, other members of the community need to be included in the conversation and in the process of research and activism, for example. A participant expressed, “We need more immigrant parents to share their stories and voices. They are often left out of the narrative.” Others expressed that it is important to make visible the experiences of immigrant youth with diverse backgrounds (e.g., youth with undocumented status). One possible way to do this is to train American and immigrant youth to interview other immigrant youth in and out of the classroom.

Bridging research and the arts is crucial. It is important to partner to creatively visualize data and research as this “1-helps inform the education of immigrant youth; 2-change the accountability debate; and 3-generate knowledge.” One participant expressed, “I want to work with Judy Baca to work with art using data. That could be a concrete collaboration. That will be defined through a set of works” Others mentioned that bringing the arts meaningfully into research might help with psychological well-being (e.g., Does mural making reduce depression?). A participant expressed, “Art is a form of liberation” and another insisted the importance of “making research as visually engaging and accessible” and this can be realized via creating media campaigns. A participant from a youth organization also pointed the need to “define our works as organizations; get organized so we can better be posed to work together.”

Lastly, participants talked about pushing for a systemic changes that educate and empower individuals. As one participant put it, “Political movement and coalition support is foundational; coalition building via network can be done via media campaigning.” Others noted the need for teacher training that emphasizes issues related to undocumented status (e.g., UndocuAlly work) and professional pipeline.

Additionally, participants talked about when developing a youth campaign on college campuses, we can work with researchers to develop surveys and work with students to became the advocates. Organizations can gain the skills to develop student leadership programs without just relying on researchers, but collaborating with them; intersections between researchers and immigrant youth are crucial.

With regard to the next steps, participants emphasized the need to come together and bridge across different community-based partners including: immigrant youth and families and communities, churches/faith-based organizations, researchers/academics, creative educators, and youth advocates/community organizers as well as funders to create, what one participant called, “a moral community.” Some participants mentioned creating a networks and narratives similar to the “Humans of New York” to help bridge empathy gap, and movements such as “Black Lives Matter” to increase visibility and awareness of issues immigrants face.
Foreseeable Challenges

One issue that emerged is that as the immigrant population faces so many challenges, it was hard to identify which one(s) were the most salient to focus upon for the network to address. Across the tables, the issues of concern that emerged during discussions included: social inequality, xenophobia, lack of public empathy, and bias towards immigrants by those in positions of power and authority. Several conversations addressed lack of voice, invisibility, lack of awareness, and lack of information and knowledge about immigrants as another problem in our society generally including for those who are charged with serving them. Then there is the problems of misinformation about immigration and immigrants.

Related to this issue of multiple challenges is the topic of scarcity, both of resources of time and fund. “There’s not enough to go around” as Fred Frelow and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco noted.

As such not every topic can be addressed with a coherent strategy and response; hence, clarity of vision of what to be tackled will be essential, especially in early stages. As Professor Louis Gomez suggested in his presentation clarity of purpose is fundamental to the development of successful Networks.

Another problem that was brought up is the siloing of various sectors as well as disciplines who work with or on immigration issues. Consistently working across these silos is going to be a challenge that will take thoughtful work

Foreseeable Challenges for Sustaining Collaborations

On one hand, there is real power in collective networks of networks if well implemented. As Conrado Santos mentioned, “Instead of working as individuals, if we have a collective group, we can do greater things. Organizations maximize the ability.” On the other hand, Karen Quartz, who has coordinated school community partnerships, astutely warned of the dangers of unwieldy bureaucracies, “I agree that we be stronger together. But the devil is in the details. . . “Everyone wants to support, but it’s in the doing that’s a problem. . . Our system needs to be flexible and partnered up and responsive.”

One table shared that an issue with building and sustaining collaborative work is the coordination of partnerships, particularly the turnover of administrators or leaders, the ongoing work of building relationships, lack of the inclusion of schools, and internal conflicts stemming from not knowing who is and/or should be involved. Additionally other discussants brought up the issue of funding to financially support collaborative projects.
Another challenge is that the work is often done in silos versus interdisciplinary and/or intersectional and there is a lack of communication across each sector (i.e., creatives, research, youth advocacy and the communities which are affected), and awareness of where there are potential collaborators. In addition, there are challenges related to: a) commitment and engagement by partners and individuals within each partnership, b) turning empathy into action, c) prioritizing data over action, d) focusing on empirical problems versus actual problems, and e) ongoing day-to-day challenges experienced by students, teachers, administrators in schools and for other partners involved.

Others noted the (de)valuing of particular types of research in academia. Integrating arts and more creative approaches into research projects can be exciting but also challenging. Academia does not always encourage or look highly upon creative research methodologies such as Photovoice and other types of action research approaches such as participatory action research (PAR). Two tables discussed the power of foundations in influencing the type of research that is privileged. Foundations should consider how they may be privileging more quantitative and econometric-based work vs. qualitative or more action-based research approaches.

Some of the additional challenges related to research with immigrant populations is the restricting nature of IRB. The IRB can be extremely challenging to work with in proposing projects with immigrant populations due to issues of confidentiality, etc. One person shared that the youth in their study wanted to use their actual names and be visible. However this researcher shared that the IRB will not approve their study “due to issues of confidentiality and protection of minors. The IRB doesn’t realize that youth are becoming more vocal and visible. They are coming out of the shadows.”

To overcome some of the challenges noted above, participants discussed the importance of identifying ways to continue the momentum of collaborations such as having regular carefully planned and curated convenings, like this, for strategizing and planning purposes. One way to meet is through virtual avenues especially when meeting in person is too difficult. Additionally it would be beneficial to meet to share best practices and successes in terms of what is working well in terms of pushing new and creative (research) agendas. Media can also be used to share best practices between networks and other communities. Networking events like this, or at a minimum a cumulative list of individuals that do work related to immigration (e.g., artist, directors of immigration coalitions) would also be beneficial for building partnerships and collaborations.

Moreover an important component to sustaining collaborative work is to reduce burnout and fatigue among collaborators. For example, a concern is sustain excitement and reduce burnout for members by providing a balance of intellectual stimulation, a supportive network of peers, sufficient resources to provide compensation for the time investment, genuine engagement and interest in the process, and a sense that the gains from the work will lead to substantive and meaningful outcomes.
Action research was particularly salient across the roundtables. The roundtables discussed action research as an approach to engage and include members across all nodes of the networks. Foundations can help by signaling the value of this kind of work. Additionally, there are immediate steps researchers can make such as presenting their work to immigrant communities and community-based organizations (according to one table- this is something that can help both parties involved). At a minimum researchers can share their research with participants from their studies. Furthermore researchers who engage in collaborative action research approaches should have honest conversations with their partners about the following questions:

- Both sides need to know: What do you need? What do I need? Are needs open and mutually beneficial?
- Are you going to leave after the data collection or when your grant runs out?

Who ELSE should be at the table?
- There was a consensus that immigrant youth must be at the center of the table. Note was made that we should be careful not to be Latino/a centric and include Asian, Muslim, Black, and LGBTQ/Trans immigrant voices at the table.
- In an effort to have a more inclusive dialogue, parents, teachers, should also be part of the on-going conversation.

Brainstorming List of Potential Future Folks to Include into Collaboration:
~ Frameworks Institute
~ Research programs across educational systems (secondary ed, higher ed, etc.)
~ Project Zero (teaching global citizenship)
~ Digital archives
~ Mentorship programs: UCLA’s CCCP, John Delloro Program
~ School PTAs
~ Faith Matters (manage hate crimes)...
~ Community engagement & diversity centers on college campuses
~ School boards
~ Politically engaged performers
~ Directors of teacher education programs
~ UCLA’s IDEAS (undocumented student programming)
~ Facing History and Ourselves
~ Jorge Ramos, TV journalist
~ New York Times Learning Center