3. Crisscross Applesauce: Reflections on Intertwined Identities

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INTRODUCTION

As other researchers have also acknowledged, participatory action research (PAR) poses many challenges for “expert” researchers and community-based researchers alike. The literature reflects a near universal acknowledgment that large-scale collaborative research projects are bound to be subjected and influenced by politics and power differentials. This is especially so in cross-racial collaborations. Situated in a US region with an entrenched history of racial conflict, the Umbrella Group’s work was rife with distrust, skepticism, and tensions that have come to characterize post-Katrina New Orleans. Many education scholars, community activists, and members New Orleans’ African American community viewed choice-based school reform efforts as an extension of neoliberal policies designed to “reclaim” and “rebuild” the city to serve corporate and White middle-class interests and sensibilities, respectively.

I am a Black woman who happens to be a researcher, a mother, and a special educator. I am a child of Haitian immigrant parents who left a county decimated by the killing and torture perpetuated by a brutal dictator. They never returned. I was born and raised in Chicago as a “child of immigrant parents” without a Haitian cultural identity, since my father, in particular, refused to claim and transmit his cultural and linguistic...
heritage to his children, given the pain and trauma he and his family experienced at the hands of his countrymen and the Duvalier regime. Though everyone I interacted with growing up saw me as Black, I was not allowed to claim my Blackness either, since Black was equated with everything bad in one of the most segregated cities in the United States. It was not until my early twenties that I arrived at a sense of self, which acknowledged my identity as a Black Haitian raised in America as a Haitian American.

Education was very important to my parents. They worked extra-long hours to be able to afford private Catholic school tuition for their three daughters. I enjoyed and benefited tremendously from my educational experiences, but always felt isolated from the majority of my Black peers. Always seeking to return home to what I viewed to be my community, I sought out majority Black schools and educational environments to teach in and conduct research in both Chicago and Milwaukee. By the time Hurricane Katrina hit, I had just begun working as a tenure-track assistant professor at a Milwaukee university. In my first month there, I connected with a professor in the sociology department to apply for a National Science Foundation grant to study the impacts of poor, displaced New Orleans residents in poor host communities in Milwaukee. Obviously, I felt strongly compelled to do something to help since I spent my first month as an assistant professor working on a Katrina-related federal grant proposal when the hurricane hit. I was unsuccessful, but undeterred and spent the next two and a half years trying to find a way into New Orleans. Simultaneously, I was on the tenure-track rat race, trying to publish or perish.

A door cracked open when I attended a regional equity summit in March 2008 in New Orleans and was introduced to a founding board member of the Umbrella Group by a family member who worked with the organization hosting the summit. We had dinner and coffee and talked long into the evening about educational equity and the burgeoning charter school movement in New Orleans. I saw a way I could contribute as I was in the midst of conducting PAR on access to charter schools for students with special needs in Milwaukee. I stayed in touch with this board member over several months until the time came when I was invited to speak with the entire board about the value and potential of PAR to foster community engagement and voice in November 2008.

As an outsider joining the Umbrella Group’s efforts, I was naïve as to how deep-seated the racial divisions were. I found myself brokering conflicts and attempting to foster consensus without a true understanding of the historical race-based legacies that played out over the duration of the project. The fact that I acted, inadvertently at times, in an “altruistic”