

Realizing the Future in the Present: Parent Organizing as a Practice of Solidarity

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Abstract

Imagining systemic change can be a lot to ask of Black and Latinx families in urban communities in light of long, sometimes intergenerational histories of marginalization and dehumanization in schools. For twenty years, CADRE (Community Asset Development Redefining Education) has been building the power and leadership of Black and Brown families in South Los Angeles “to protect and promote children’s dignity, opportunity to learn, and self-determination, by being at decision-making and policy-making tables and having the tools to monitor accountability in policy implementation.” When the community organizing group first engaged with the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC), CADRE had already successfully gotten the district to adopt new school discipline policies to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and had continued to monitor implementation (CADRE, 2017). However, the fundamental relationships and interactions between families and teachers in schools continued to reflect racist, dehumanizing ideologies entrenched in inequitable power dynamics. Maisie Chin, the Executive Director of CADRE, facilitated a series of codesign sessions with CADRE parents between 2017 and 2019 to not only surface these dynamics but to re-imagine *how* parent-teacher conversations and interactions might be different. CADRE co-designers undertook role-playing and collective reflection to intervene in moment-to-moment interactions as a way to change broader systemic dynamics.

Keywords: parent organizing; leadership development; educational justice; school-to-prison pipeline; humanizing; solidarity; codesign; community-based organizations

Imagining systemic change can be a lot to ask of Black and Latinx families in urban communities in light of long, sometimes intergenerational histories of marginalization and dehumanization in schools. For 20 years, Community Asset Development Redefining Education – better known as CADRE – has been building the power and leadership practice of Black and Brown families in South Los Angeles “to ensure that all children are rightfully educated regardless of where

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they live” (CADRE, 2022). Through parent organizing, CADRE works to “challenge schools’ beliefs and practices that criminalize children and parents and violate their human rights to a quality education, dignity, and participation in our current public education system” (CADRE, 2022). When CADRE first engaged with the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC), the community organizing group had already successfully lobbied the district to adopt new school discipline policies to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and was continuing to monitor the implementation of these policies (CADRE, 2017). However, the relationships and interactions between families and teachers in schools have fundamentally continued to reflect racist, dehumanizing ideologies entrenched in inequitable power dynamics. Maisie Chin, the Executive Director of CADRE, facilitated a series of co-design sessions with CADRE parents between 2017 and 2019 to not only surface these dynamics but to re-imagine how parent-teacher conversations and interactions could go differently. CADRE co-designers engaged in role-playing and collective reflection to intervene in moment-to-moment interactions as a way to change broader systemic dynamics.

CADRE’s original plan had been to invite teachers into design circles to cultivate solidarity between families and educators. However, when Black and Latinx families shared their ongoing negative interactions with teachers in the first design circle, CADRE co-designers realized that putting families into such power-laden and potentially confrontational situations without having first designed generative ways into these conversations could lead to re-traumatization (Ishimaru et al., 2018). Thus, the subsequent design sessions focused on rehearsing the kinds of changes families wished to see in their relationships with teachers and finding ways to humanize both families and teachers. Through this practice, Maisie facilitated the co-design of prefigurative everyday leadership moves with organizers and parents to cultivate a proleptic politic (Cole, 1998) that, in Maisie’s own words, “realizes the future in the present.” That is, the design work became a process of collective learning to change every day, powered interactions in ways that centered the solidarities families sought to build and realize in their schools, lives, and world.

This edited interview with Maisie Chin situates CADRE’s co-design and role-play practices within the broader landscape of racial-historical movements, the organization’s overall work in Los Angeles, and Maisie’s own positionality and learning. As an Asian American woman in South Central LA, she experienced the LA riots of 1992 and recalls images of Asian business owners pointing guns at their Black neighbors. For Maisie, this singularly clarifying moment catalyzed her commitment to *live* solidarities with Black and Brown communities. She explained, “I tell people a lot that what I do at CADRE is really my AAPI politics. You know, I picked a side, and I made sure that whatever privilege I had was funneled into changing the conditions for Black and Brown folk – in particular, trying to create a world that wasn’t at the expense of their humanity.”

In what follows, we share Maisie’s reflections and insights about the arc of CADRE’s work in relation to the complex theories of change that layered into co-designing solidarity practices with Black and Brown parents in their schools. We first explore her own consciousness regarding the racialized carceral dynamics in schools and link that to CADRE’s focus on behavior and discipline as a kind of crucible for anti-Blackness and dehumanization in schools. Maisie situates the demonization of behavior as part of a broader settler colonial project, the unsettling of which demands no less than a project of decolonizing, not only of schools and educators but of everyone, including Black and Brown parents and communities themselves. In a system that works to pit Black and Brown parents and communities against each other, Maisie unpacks CADRE’s focus on building cross-racial solidarities and using the co-design role-plays as a way to develop solidarity as a lived practice. We close the article with Maisie’s reflections on what it means to enact a pedagogy of love as a way forward for learning solidarity and building a different society.

Behavior as the Crux of Anti-Blackness, Colonization, and Dehumanization in Schools

Maisie narrates how, as an Asian American in LA, she came to her understanding of the need to decolonize the idea of behavior as a metric of worth. The conflation of behavior and worth are deeply embedded in the racialized institutional scripts (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017) in schools, a dynamic that reinforces anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity towards young people and their parents. She argues that only by “deprogramming” our notions of behavior can we begin to truly center and humanize Black youth and parents.

When I started working in education, I realized that the commodity of behavior, this thing called “behavior,” was being leveraged in a way that I probably didn’t even realize before I started working in education. I realized that people saw me and actually assumed I’d be against Black and Brown people and based on perceptions that my people care about education. So, any behavior that didn’t work at schools was presumed to be something that I would be against, period. And so, when teachers, white teachers in particular, said all kinds of dehumanizing things about Black and Brown children and then approached me as if I was going to be some co-conspirator, that’s when I started to totally dismantle that. That’s why I started to reorient it completely.

Behavior is the most egregious form of meting out dehumanization – to police behavior, to judge behavior, to assign properties to behavior that somehow justify the dehumanization. And so, when I realized how outrageously poorly people were talking about parents, the way that they talked about them – it didn’t make sense. How do you actually care about their kids? You can’t possibly care about their kids in spite of their parents, right? What kind of care is that? Whereas you care about *me* because of my parents? You don’t know anything about me, but because you stereotype my parents, you care about me. I could be the worst at everything, and you would think I still care about education just because of that. So, it is a sort of a binary, but it’s a flip of the script. It is kind of an inversion – okay, you think that’s what I care about? Well, I actually think behavior should not be leveraged and wielded like that on people in judgment of behavior.

And so, for the sake of centering Black folks, everybody is decolonizing for the sake of humanizing the behavior of Black students and parents and not using it to wield punishment. That means we all got to decolonize how we all got programmed to use behavior as the metric for who was worthy and who was not. And so, it ends up being a whole unraveling of a moment to challenge a lot of our beliefs. So, certainly, it challenges how I was raised culturally. So that’s why I say, I think everybody could do that if they actually looked at the political properties of behavior and how it’s being used on this land for this settler colonial experiment. Which is why I stayed in the Family Leadership Design Collaborative space. There’s this whole link because a project of settler colonialism is based on demonizing behavior.

But we never talk about that in the debate around education, that it’s still a project of settler colonialism. So, therefore, this was actually the first place, to be honest, that made that whole link. And that, to build cross-community solidarity, you actually have to decolonize what you think about behavior. Because that’s literally how the notion is used. So, to me, it’s the heart – there’s no way we could do this work a different way. Because it would totally undermine anything we’re trying to do if we didn’t build solidarity. We’re not perfect at it. We don’t ask people if they want to build solidarity; we just do it. We’re literally trying to be the opposite of real life out there, which is “everyone for themselves.”

Cross-Community Solidarity to Tackle Racism

Discussions of solidarity and organizing can easily slip into romanticized notions of collectivity and common cause that belie the complexities of hierarchical power and normative judgments of worth within and between non-dominant parents and communities. However, Maisie points out that such flattened constructions, especially when invoked towards short-term transactional wins, do little to shift the undergirding frameworks that animate systemic harm. She narrates how even within Black communities and between parents, forms of lateral violence can play out dominant white supremacist settler logics in ways that function to enlist parents of color in the system's task of dehumanization. Thus, CADRE has aimed to "live" solidarity beyond the logics of "good or bad" parents and divide-and-conquer tactics premised on which community of color is in the majority. Rather, the organization has intentionally sought to create the conditions for people to center Black families with historical roots in South LA and humanize each other in the day-to-day practices of the organization.

I think we landed on the fact that if you have to tackle racism and in a Black and Brown space, you need to have solidarity. But you also can't have that solidarity mask over tensions, and you can't have solidarity still cover up anti-Blackness underneath. And so, when you watch what was happening with school staff and parents, it was often pitting everyone against each other. So, the "good" and "bad" parent paradigm was still being used to divide and conquer. Whatever we did at CADRE, we weren't going to do that. And it was hard to figure out what to do *instead* because all the reasons the schools wanted the parents were predicated on good behavior by parents and solidarity with the school. It was like, "You help us, and then we will give you the credibility of being this 'good' parent. If you challenge us, we're gonna call you a troublemaker, and everybody's gonna think you and your child or children are problems." So that's not a lot of wiggle room for parents. Especially if you're trying to challenge that, if you're conscious, and you want to challenge discrimination or dehumanization.

It was hard because even parents do that with each other, as we've all been conditioned to do. Trying to get parents to build solidarity around other children's behavior, the children that they don't want their kids to hang out with, the children that they don't want their kids to be friends with – that's not easy. Even some Black families look down on each other, they meted out that stuff on each other. And this really isn't about just the racial aspect. It was also this notion of decolonizing and deprogramming the things that people assigned to behavior into parenting and the lack of compassion that we are all conditioned to not have for parents. So, it's almost like it just furthers the whole dehumanization of US schools, because you already have the parents doing the work – you have the parents dehumanizing other people's kids, and judging others, fellow parents, based on that.

And if the only thing you come together around is maybe removing a principal or responding to some crisis at the school, once that's over, there's nothing to fall back on. It's all purely transactional. There's nothing really solidarity about that. And then, you look at all the existing frameworks for parents to be engaged. It precludes any solidarity between parents – about understanding each other's experiences as humanizing. It's all based on being both good soldiers and students as servants at the schools.

I dare say that we are not perfect at solidarity. I think we just know that if we didn't aim for it, we wouldn't even come close. We wouldn't have a shot. Because you could be one way in CADRE and not quite that way outside of CADRE. We totally know that. So, we don't have a Pollyanna version of solidarity. It's just, we know it's a practice, and if you don't have the conditions to even practice it just a little bit, then we have no chance. I don't think solidarity means you necessarily have to be a good person. You just need to practice solidarity. The assignment of good and bad is not part of it. And most of the time, solidarity is built when there's nothing at stake except a feeling – a

feeling in the moment. Like you want the Kumbaya, so that's the thing that you aim for, right? But then you're not testing it, and you're not building it around the thing that actually divides you.

So that's how we counter the school environment. My little mantra has always been, we have to be better than the school, whatever we do. We have seen what schools do with parents: we just gotta be better. It's a small thing, but parents know that we give them excellence. We create the conditions where they don't have to compete about who's getting treated better because we are hyper-conscious of favoritism. And it's 50–50. I don't care if there's one Black parent and 15 Brown parents – it's 50–50. We're going to translate everything; it's going to be bilingual. Most of the time, the school just goes with the majority, and that's the language they conduct the meeting in. We might not have any Black parents, but we're gonna have Black staff. They're gonna build with Black facilitators. We're gonna talk about the history of Black folks, even if there are no Black folks in the room. It didn't matter if they were in the minority in the schools and in the community. They were in the center.

Whereas if you go to a school site, it's all demographics. It's all numbers. Everyone just starts to fall into the habit that's really brought about by circumstances, but not intention. So, if you don't have any Black bodies in the room, or any Indigenous people or whoever aren't in the room, you don't feel the need to serve them. And then we're doing parent engagement in that context. So inherently, it's going to be divisive. There's no way it couldn't be. And so, the practice that we do – people think we have a training – we don't really have a training. We started doing political education way after we did solidarity. We just did it. We just try to live it.

Latinx parents who are kind of curious might ask, “Okay, when do we talk about us?” Because they're just looking at the fact that in South LA, Latinx students make up like, 90%, 95% of the schools now. And so, it is gonna be hard for us to do what we're doing. It means that we need staff who are, even if they're not Black, able to hold this line. So, things like the role-play and people practicing a different response is, to me, the only way I know how to interrupt the defaults.

Solidarity as a Practice of Interrupting Dehumanization “When no one is Looking”

We foster an environment where Black parents work with each other to help see the need for solidarity. I think all of our parents are probably anomalies in their respective environments as a result. But then, CADRE becomes a place where they know how to take that stand. And our goal is that when nobody is looking, they have solidarity that is not performative, that when you're in the school office, and you see the school staff totally harshly punishing another child that isn't your child, that you are concerned, and you will leverage your voice and your power to intervene. And you won't let that school talk badly about their family or their parent, even if their parent needs some support, and isn't coming in the way that we need them to. But that you'll stand in between that dehumanization; you'll interrupt that. Then you'll stick up for them as human beings and their children. And the school staff are not expecting that because they're expecting most people to just dispose of these children and to want them out of their environment.

And so that's what disrupts the normal school culture, which is that you have parents standing up for the “kids that nobody wants,” that other parents want removed. And I often tell people that we have to work hard to get people to buy into our work – it's not easy, and we never take it for granted. “You want me to stand for the kids that I think are ruining my child's school experience and disrupting their learning?” That's not an easy sell, to be quite honest. So, if we didn't have the solidarity practice and the bottom line, we wouldn't even be able to interrupt that. Maybe it wouldn't even be on the table, because it doesn't really have to be in most places. It doesn't have to be on the table. The

world just hums along, and they're training all of us to take each other out, and that's kind of what they want. So, the solidarity is the *only* way that we can even attempt to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. So, it's not the issue of the school-to-prison pipeline. I think people over-associate us with the issue. But the issue allowed us to uncover and deal with the things that haven't been dealt with.

Role-Play as Practicing Solidarity

For their work with the Family Leadership Design Collaborative, the CADRE parents and organizers role-played educators and Black and Brown parents acting out scenarios drawn from their lived experiences in school settings regarding student behavior. Parents re-imagined a scenario in which they interacted as they typically would with a teacher or principal, engaged in critical reflection to make sense of specific well-worn dynamics, and identified potential new ways of interacting. They then role-played possible interventions to shift the conversation. Black parents experienced particular forms of anti-Blackness in school discipline conversations, so the group role-played ways to intervene in these emotionally tense, trauma-infused moments. Rather than making participants relive the trauma, though, CADRE organizers sought to disrupt those interactions and open them up as opportunities for Black and Latinx parents to practice how to move in solidarity with one another and how to humanize their relations and actions in these crucial interactions. Thus, the practice of role-playing enabled co-designers to practice intervening in the day-to-day micro-moments that constitute and enact the layered systemic dynamics of anti-Black racism in schools (see [FLDC Practice Brief](#) for more details on the practice itself). For Maisie, digging into role-play at this level sat at the heart of an organization that has always sought to model how the world could be if we refused anti-Blackness and lived in solidarity, especially with Black and Brown parents. CADRE itself has thus sought to embody a kind of meta-role-play as an organization working to “live” a different world.

In role-plays, parents advocate from a different place. They advocate from a more self-determined place, as opposed to a reactionary, “wait-til-everything-happens” kind of place. This complicated issue of standing up, advocating for the implementation of a different kind of discipline that was humanistic and humanizing, and not punitive – I realized that all those things happen behind closed doors. And when parents are pulled into those meetings, nobody else is there but them. And that's the moment they have to interrupt. There's no amount of training we can give them that would prompt them to realize that right then and there is where I practice the thing that I learned how to do. So that's kind of what we had to bring to life.

A conversation with a teacher about your child's behavior is even a bit harder. So what we did with the design circles in the first part of this project was, how do you talk to them about your childhood? How do you proactively talk to them about your child's behavior? So instead of, “I really want my child to go to college, he was really interested in X.” And, you know, “this is his favorite subject, how's he doing? What is he struggling [with]?” – that's a normal expectation for a conversation with your child's teacher. It's rarely proactively like, “Oh, my child is a little hyperactive. I need you to know that. Do you know how to deal with that? I find that this works with him or her, or Papa does X, so can we...?” It's often more the case that parents wait until they get the phone call, and they get pulled into the conversation retroactively. So that's the first thing we try to do: how do you initiate the whole conversation? And it's hard because some parents don't want to talk about that. They don't want to hear that. It's hard. It's not automatic, not an easy conversation. And our goal was to help them realize that nobody but you, the parent, can initiate that conversation. So, the first thing was just role-playing, the same thing you do around academics, just do that for behavior. That's it – try it.

So then in real life, all this stuff that we talk about – the school says they support those kids, but it's a shambles in real life, in all these situational moments. The politics all just disappear because the power dynamics of a school and the culture of “good versus bad,” and the ranking of people

according to that logic just takes over subconsciously. And as a parent, you don't realize that you could say you want to end racism, but then you inadvertently – even sometimes without knowing – you participate in a practice of it. You just view behavior from a lens of, bad behavior is associated with certain people. And you're just looking out for, who are those kids? And you think you're helping your kid because you're looking out for those kids and trying to identify who they are. So, you end up participating in all that, then you think you're trying to end racism, right?

So, the role-plays were almost out of necessity because all these situations are really where it has to matter. If we don't give parents a chance to practice in these situations, the situations become all these missed opportunities. So we were trying to help them shift how they observed a class, to be conscious of how they're observing a classroom. They could shift or realize, “you know, I fell for it.” Even them admitting that they fell for the program. That's okay. At least you know now, because there's a kind of place where we help you become conscious of that. The school would not want you to do that, right? The school wants you to play into that hand. Same thing with these implementation committee meetings for the discipline policy.

So that's how we started using school discipline policy committee meetings in the context that led to the role-play that we shared with FLDC. Let's role-play a very dysfunctional school committee meeting – which is very typical – where they're tokenizing the topic; they're putting on an agenda because they have to, but they're not really having a talk about it. And if you ask a hard question, they're going to dismiss you. And what are you going to do at that point? We were trying to figure out, how do we train parents to intervene when they're dismissing the question? When they're tokenizing the parent. And they're the only parent in the room, but they literally have the most power to raise that issue and raise that question. *No one else* can ask that question but the parent, actually. If you're questioning our policy implementation, you as a parent can ask, “Aren't you supposed to be doing X, Y, and Z? Why is that not on the agenda?” No one else is gonna say that. The parent, though, can say it. And we had to role-play that for them to realize, no, you can actually say something. And they had to make the connection between how most meetings happen, where they didn't question those dynamics, and then coming to realize, “Oh, it's a place for intervention.” And so, we had a role-play for that.

Facilitative Capacities to Use Role-Play to Practice Solidarity

In 2019, CADRE engaged FLDC partners from multiple collaboratives in this role-play practice as we sought to learn from and evolve our practices across communities and contexts. The resulting role-play was emotionally tense and transformative for both participants and observers at the convening, as Roslyn (a long-time CADRE parent leader and Black mother) role-played a distraught parent who showed up at a school discipline policy implementation meeting to seek support for her son. Other members of FLDC role-played the principal, teachers, and other Black and Latinx parents with different perspectives (for example, the Latina mother who had been hand-picked by the principal to be on the committee). As she did with CADRE parents, Maisie stopped and restarted the interactions to help the FLDC participants to notice particular scripts and power dynamics, to name the tensions and emotions in the room, and to invite us to imagine and try out different ways to intervene and redirect the interactions unfolding in the moment. For instance, she invited a Latina mother to step up in solidarity with the Black mother and speak back to the principal in a way that sought to center the other parent's needs and priorities around her son. Maisie unpacked the facilitation and capacities that made that role-play such a powerful learning experience.

The hard part is that we always need to cultivate staff capacity to run these role-plays. And so, if our staff have never gone through a role-play, then it's really hard for them to facilitate it. So we didn't do it that often. And then we need parents who know how to play the parts in the very deliberate

ways to bring all of that out. And so, if the parents weren't there to do that, we didn't mess around and just didn't do it, because it has to be deliberate.

Roslyn has to play a very specific role for all the stuff to come out. We can't role-play a representational meeting. We have to role-play that moment when all this stuff comes out: the parent is speaking truth to power, and the parent is getting rebuffed. The parent is trying to figure out how to intervene and fight back. That's what they need to see. So, you actually need a parent who can consciously role-play that, and that is an outcome of a process of development as well because you have to be able to be outside of yourself to know what you're experiencing in this meeting. You have to be able to look at yourself while you're in the meeting and what happened. And most parents are just engaged with it, or they're listening.

That was the challenge – that we needed to do it enough to where all the parents could make the journey where the role-play wasn't just a reenactment. The role-play was actually the experimentation. “Okay, what if I were to say this?” And then someone else will be role-playing an organic response of defensiveness, of dismissiveness, of dehumanizing – someone has to role-play that then for you to learn. What would I do in that instance? How would I leverage all this stuff that I know?

If we could have created a school where I could train and everyone knew how to do this, it would have been lovely. I think the one you saw up in the last FLDC convening was probably the best one we had, but that a lot of it was because other people helped us out, and they had school experience. And they could fully live into playing those roles. But we have a lot of people who have been programmed to not see those things. And so, I don't think the role-play just works if you just set it up. I think you have to cultivate the consciousness and the self-awareness and the self-empowerment, if you will, to say that “I want to practice being uncomfortable and hone my skills of how to respond in those situations.” It can bring up a lot of stuff because we humanize parents. We know that's the other thing – we don't assume that parents want to role-play those kinds of traumatic experiences. So, it's not something we force people to do. We don't do it all the time to where we gloss over those possibilities. A lot of times our parents' relation with their schools is an extension of their own relationship with the school when they were children.

So that role-play that you saw us do at the FLDC convening – not every parent could have done that. Some parents would have fallen right back and would have been triggered in the same way they were triggered before in real life. And it might have even created harm, to be quite honest. So, the role-play was only possible because we had developed Roslyn and any other parent who was able to play that part. But I would say not many people can play that part. So, we did role-plays, but then we couldn't do them as much as I hoped we could do them because it took a lot of development of each person in order to create a role-play that it would reflect the actual dehumanization that we know goes on.

A Pedagogy of Love for Learning the Practice of Solidarity

Too often, efforts to address racial inequities and systemic harm in schools take the form of panels or listening sessions in which youth or parents of color must replay their trauma for the benefit of (mostly white) educators' learning. Not only does this constitute a form of “trauma on display” that can cause further harm to families, it frequently reinforces the existing dynamics of hierarchical power by situating the agency to address such inequities solely as a matter of professional expertise in institutional decision-making. That is, it positions educators as the decision-makers about whether and how to undertake change to remedy the systemic and moment-to-moment instantiations of racialized harm. In contrast, CADRE's organizational and role-play practices seek to build the capacity and agency of Black and Brown parents themselves to learn practices of solidarity as ways to intervene in these complex dynamics. Below, Maisie reflects

on what she has learned about how to develop the capacity of others to do role-plays like the ones she did with CADRE and in the FLDC convening. We (Megan and Ann) asked her: what is the capacity to act to disrupt the reproductions of harm when nobody's looking? Maisie situates this capacity within a deeper developmental process of learning to love yourself enough to forgive yourself – and then to own your agency and self-determination towards relationships premised not on “good or bad” judgments that merely repeat a cycle of trauma but on remaking a world that embodies healing, humanizing relations, and liberation.

I think it's an arduous process to have people get to that theoretical place – that “meta” place where they can take their life experience, they can understand the historical forces that shaped the underpinnings of it. Then they can think about themselves in that context and how were they shaped by it. Then they can see how that actually then influenced all the things they did subsequent to that. And then they can love themselves enough to forgive themselves in that reflection and in that discovery – and then realize that they have the power to show up differently in the very next second.

I think it's this combination – I've got to do enough political education, but I don't want this to be academic. I don't want you to rest in the consciousness; I need you to practice the thing that we've learned from history instead of critiquing how we keep making the same mistakes. And we keep saying we're going to change things, and nothing changes, and the same things keep happening. I would posit that it's because if all of us disrupted our own little things – and not from a righteous, woke place but from a real, humble, conscientious use of your power as a human being – and especially at schools...if we had a critical mass of parents who knew how to do this, things would be completely different.

We have so many parents who are so harmed and traumatized that [they have been deflated by it] and sometimes they kind of hydrate, and they get seen for the first time – but they don't actually step all the way into that empowerment. It takes staff and people around the parents who can understand all these human dynamics and the healing process but also the trauma cycles, as well as just cold hard strategy of interrupting dehumanizing actions and behaviors by people who have more power. How do you support people in learning how to do that? It's *not enough* that you're conscious.

I would say the experiment is really trying to build up an organization that produces and initiates all this, and it has the right conditions where people then are in charge of their own development so that they learn how to do this work in this way. [That learning], for example, looks like, “I'm not gonna let you off the hook right now. Because if you get past your moment right now, and you actually do the work that I'm asking in this way that I'm inviting you to do and that we have set up the conditions for you to do, that we put the whole organization around – then you can heal, and your practice can be different for you in your own life.” People end up having to completely reconsider their relationships with their own parents, their own children, if they really absorb the full breadth of what we're doing. And it's not righteous. It's not like we're trying to make you a “good” parent. We just want you to be conscious of everything. Because the more conscious you are, the more choices you're going to know that you can make. And the more you choose – as opposed to react – you're going to begin to understand what it takes for liberation. You're going to understand what it takes to be self-determining.

Radical Love

As Maisie reflected not only on the work with FLDC but her 20 years of building leadership and organizing with Black and Brown parents in LA with CADRE, she highlighted crucial insights and lessons about the limitations of fostering “egoic” leadership and short-term policy wins that do not push beyond the dynamics of individualism and hierarchical power embedded in dominant systems. She named a contradiction that many in community organizing are reluctant to grapple openly with – one not only shaped by external neoliberal policy and funding contexts (Nygreen, 2017)

but also by the colonizing logics that infuse our organizations, communities, and “movement politics.” Supporting those marginalized and harmed by generations of dominant systems to “step into” their leadership can be done “incompletely” in a way that might feel empowering in the moment and garner recognition in the news, particularly in the wake of generational trauma. However, Maisie argued that solely elevating individuals to reinforce dominant power and settler logics can undermine projects of collective healing, dignity, and liberation. Instead, the work of CADRE seeks to embody a radical love that commits to the capacity of all parents and people to “unpack themselves” together as they build a more humanizing practice and world.

The school is not giving up its power. I don't care how nice you are, how good of a parent you are – they're not giving it up. You could be that “good” parent, and the minute your child goes upside down one day, you're gonna be just like everybody else. So, I think parents are being trained to put a lot of stock into egoic power and being the favorites of a school and favorites of a teacher, thinking that that's going to help their kid. That only works for white people, you know – that's the irony.

We're really trying to get to a place where our parents are these very conscious leaders. They're not just egoic leaders, these “I feel powerful” leaders, but they're actually very conscious about how they use their power, how they use it, and whether it comes at the expense of someone else. [The parent leader from the role-play we discussed], Roslyn is a parent – people put her on this pedestal. They think she's this one-of-a-kind. But the radical love is thinking that other people could embody this. If you're going to assign it to one person, then we're in trouble. We have no hope if we're just looking for them. It's like looking for the next charismatic leader, right? Roslyn is what gives me the belief that it is possible, just like my own learning gives me the confidence that other people can practice this and learn it. They just have to give it the same self-love. They have to be able to unpack themselves. And if they just do that, we got it – the rest is all just information.

I would say the other part of this equation is why we're an organizing group, but we don't do a bunch of campaigns: because campaigns don't cultivate this. The win is something that then gives our parents a handle, like a leverage that then we can train them to use. It's not really about the next policy victory, being in the news, and we just keep knocking it out. Rather, we get a policy passed so we can train and monitor. Because that's when you're gonna learn how much power you have.

But if I conditioned you to just go for the policy victory, and then you think you have power – and really most policy victories, there's deals being made. It's not even really people power, really. And nobody who organizes with us [other organizing groups] really monitors. And all that happens is a year or two years later, [other groups say,] “What have you done for us lately? You passed this but you didn't do X!” But I say, they can't give you that – they don't *want* to know how to do it differently.” If you don't monitor, interrupt them and hold them accountable, they're not going to give you the thing that you think you want. Even the money, they're gonna hide it.

We literally went for the discipline policy because we knew it now means we can call out all the BS that they do. So, the next time you demean a student in front of their classmates, now we can push back. Before that policy, parents could push back, but it was a teacher's word against the parent or the kid. So now we can at least say, “I call racism” at least, and it has to go in as a different baseline. So, we actually pushed for the policy just so we could train parents to actually monitor something that schools never want parents to monitor. And it created a whole movement.

A whole movement has ensued from that victory, but I will say, unfortunately, I don't think everybody monitors. And even though the movement is filled with groups of color and community-based work, it's this part that I don't know how to do en masse. And so sometimes, the movement politics still has us demanding policy changes, just talking about the problem over and over again and not actually training people to disrupt. So that's why I appreciated the article you've written [about racialized institutional scripts about parents]. There's no way that those scripts aren't going to happen. I view that what schools do to parents – the divide-and-conquer that they do with parents over

behavior and very egoic valuations of people and their worthiness – that it doesn't set us up for a different society. This is the project. This is the way they do it. Anti-Blackness is sealed when you demonize behavior. Because if you always think only certain people are associated with that behavior, we're never going to get out.

I don't know how we change education if we don't all focus on decriminalizing behavior and humanizing. I truly believe that if we humanize parents to the nth degree, like we all want to humanize young people, then school would be a whole different paradigm. You have to respect the parents and their humanity. You wouldn't suspend their kids. You would know that suspending the kids is not going to help their family. It's gonna destroy their family and/or cause more stress in an already stressed-out situation. So you won't have to convince people. Everything would be a total inversion of priorities. And meanwhile, we are stuck advocating for these priorities but on top of a foundation that doesn't breed humanism. I don't believe that we can plug all the holes in education without totally redefining parenting, totally humanizing parents, and starting from that point and seeing what it gets us.

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