


Participatory Action Research and Evaluation

 A community-driven approach to research, evaluation, and social change that intentionally includes the people who are most affected by an inquiry in the design and execution of the process

Participatory Research and Evaluation Overview

Participatory approaches to research and evaluation intentionally include the people and groups who are most affected by an inquiry in the design and execution of the process. Participatory forms of research and evaluation help to ensure that the methods and findings reflect the perspectives, cultures, priorities, or concerns of those who are being studied. Because students, parents, community members, or other stakeholders are given active roles in a participatory research or evaluation process—and therefore roles in producing new knowledge or insights about their school, organization, or community—participatory research is a foundational and widely used strategy in organizing, engagement, and equity work.

While participatory approaches to research and evaluation can take a wide variety of forms, and many different methodologies (both [quantitative](#) and [qualitative](#)) may be used to achieve different objectives, participatory approaches to research and evaluation can be organized into three broad categories:

1. **Participatory research** is typically conducted by academics and other professional researchers who involve or collaborate with the individuals and groups that would have traditionally been considered the “subjects” of a study. The primary intention of many formal forms of participatory research—such as projects supported by academic institutions or philanthropic foundations—are to make a contribution to expanding knowledge in a scholarly or professional field, rather than directly change the communities, organizations, or groups being studied.
2. **Participatory action research** (commonly abbreviated as PAR) is intended to study *and* change a particular community, neighborhood, school, organization, group, or team. Participatory action research might be used to shape the design of a new initiative, inform the execution of an organizing campaign, provide evidence supporting a particular political position, or increase understanding of a local issue or problem. Participatory action research initiatives are typically designed and led by local practitioners and community members, though they may collaborate with professional researchers and evaluators on both the design and execution of the process.
 - **Youth participatory action research** (or YPAR) is a common form of participatory

action research that is designed and conducted by youth leaders, typically working in collaboration with adult mentors. While youth participatory action research utilizes the same general methods and approaches as adult-led forms of participatory action research, adult mentors usually provide developmentally appropriate guidance and support to the youth researchers leading the research process.

3. **Participatory evaluation (PE)** is used to assess the effectiveness or impact of a program, process, or plan either during or after implementation. Participatory evaluations are either conducted by professional evaluators who utilize a participatory approach, or they are designed and led by local practitioners and community members who may or may not collaborate with professional evaluators.

Participatory approaches to research, action research, and evaluation are based on similar philosophies, theories, and methods. For example, they start with many of the same underlying assumptions, such as:

- People don't need advanced degrees or professional credentials to conduct valuable research.
- All groups and cultures have their own biases, including professional researchers and evaluators who are trying to remain "neutral" or "objective" observers.
- Everyone can contribute valuable expertise, insights, and knowledge to a research or evaluation process.
- Those who are closest to an issue, problem, or program generally know the most about it.
- The involvement of diverse participants with different perspectives can help researchers, evaluators, practitioners, and community members produce insights that are less biased and closer to the truth.

In addition, both participatory action research and participatory evaluation are rooted in similar social-justice theories, especially theories related to the *democratization of knowledge*, which refers to the perspective that individuals and groups have the right to construct their own narratives, produce their own knowledge, and make sense of their own experiences.

This introduction will discuss the two forms of participatory research that are most accessible to local leaders, organizers, and practitioners involved in organizing, engagement, and equity work: **participatory action research (PAR)** and **participatory evaluation (PE)**.

Participatory Action Research Defined

One of the more influential definitions of participatory action research was developed by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, editors of [*The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*](#):

“Action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.”

Participatory action research and youth participatory action research are a subset of the broader field of *action research*, which Richard Sagor, author of [*Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*](#), defines as:

“A disciplined process of inquiry conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the ‘actor’ in improving and/or refining his or her actions.”

Reason and Bradbury provide further elaboration on participatory forms of action research:

“Action research is a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing. It is not so much a *methodology* as an *orientation to inquiry* that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity, and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues. Action research challenges much received wisdom in both academia and among social change and development practitioners, not least because it is a practice of participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater

or less extent as inquiring co-researchers. Action research does not start from a desire of changing others 'out there,' although it may eventually have that result, rather it starts from an orientation of change *with* others.”

In formal academic contexts, *action research* and *participatory action research* are often contrasted with more traditional research approaches—specifically positivism and interpretivism—that are typically conducted by independent academic or professional researchers who do not involve “subjects” in the design or execution of the research process. While traditional research studies usually culminate in a written report of findings, and PAR projects often do as well, a primary objective of participatory action research is to effect change in a community, organization, or program or to improve the practice and effectiveness of individuals and teams.

While there are multiple—and sometimes conflicting—definitions of the two related concepts, *action research* generally refers to processes that are undertaken largely or exclusively by professionals, such as teams of school administrators or teachers. That said, some scholars or practitioners may use the term *action research* when describing forms of research that are considered participatory action research to others.

In certain contexts, participatory action research may also be called *critical participatory action research*, *community action research*, or *community-based participatory research*, among other terms, and different terms may represent divergent philosophical or methodological approaches to PAR.

Table 1— Differences in Emphasis Between Traditional Research and Research Using a Participatory Action Research Paradigm

TRADITIONAL RESEARCH PARADIGM	PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PARADIGM
Emphasis is on “learning about” research subjects	Emphasis is on “learning from and learning about” research subjects
Objectivity vis-à-vis research and subjects is valued	Subjective experiences of subjects are also valued
Researcher acts as “professional”	Researcher acts as “consultant,” “educator”
Research is best conducted by “outsiders”	Research must have input from “insiders,” i.e., those being studied
Subjects have one role; that of research subject	Subjects have dual roles both as subjects and as researchers
Subjects are passive objects of study and do not contribute to the research process	Subjects are actively involved in the conceptualization, design, implementation, and interpretation of research studies
Traditional paradigm lends itself to controlled, experimental research studies	Participatory Action Research paradigm also lends itself to qualitative, ethnographic studies and to studies of the disability experience
Subjects’ involvement in research ends when data collection is complete	Subjects act as “change agents” converting results of research into new policy, programmatic or research initiatives
Research agenda shaped by professional and socio-political forces	Research agenda influenced directly by the concerns of many constituents, including the end-users of services

Excerpted from Rogers, E. & Palmer-Erbs, V. (1994). Participatory Action Research: Implications for research and evaluation in psychiatric rehabilitation. *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal*, 18(2), 3-12.

Some of the fundamental features, principles, and methods that distinguish participatory action research from more traditional forms of academic and professional research. Source: Karen Danley and Marsha Ellison, *A Handbook for Participatory Action Researchers*.

Participatory Evaluation Defined

The primary distinction between participatory evaluation and participatory action research is that “PE” typically studies the implementation and impact of a specific program or process that has already been developed, while participatory action research typically investigates larger community issues or problems to inform the development of a new or emerging program or process. Both PAR and PE study past and current events to directly inform and influence future events.

In an influential 1998 article, “[Framing Participatory Evaluation](#),” J. Bradley Cousins and Elizabeth Whitmore proposed two primary modes and objectives of participatory evaluation:

1. **Practical Participatory Evaluation (P-PE):** “The core premise of P-PE is that stakeholder participation in the evaluation process will enhance evaluation relevance, ownership, and thus utilization.” According to Cousins and Whitmore, *utilization* has three primary uses or effects: “(1) instrumental, the provision of support for discrete decisions; (2) conceptual, as in the educative or learning function; and (3) symbolic, the persuasive or political use of evaluation to reaffirm decisions already made or to further a particular agenda.”
2. **Transformative Participatory Evaluation (T-PE):** “Transformative participatory evaluation invokes participatory principles and actions in order to democratize social change.” According to Cousins and Whitmore, “Several key concepts underpin T-PE. Most fundamental is the issue of who controls the production of knowledge. One important aim of T-PE is to empower people through the process of constructing and respecting their own knowledge (based on Freire’s notion of ‘[conscientization](#)’) and through their understanding of the connections among knowledge, power, and control.... A second key concept relates to the process. How is the evaluation conducted? The distance between researcher and researched is broken down; all participants are contributors working collectively.... A third concept, critical reflection, requires participants to question, to doubt, and to consider a broad range of social factors, including their own biases and assumptions.”

	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
INTERNAL EVALUATION Initiative staff act as evaluators as either a portion or the entirety of their job.	Can be less costly than an external evaluator	Often have less access to specialized knowledge about evaluation methods and techniques than professional evaluators
	Usually have a rich understanding of the initiative's context, practices, and potential key evaluation questions; easy access to data	Sometimes seen by funders and other stakeholders as less credible than external evaluations due to having a stake in a positive view and possible greater reluctance of participants to share criticism
EXTERNAL EVALUATION Conducted by professional evaluators, usually hired by programs/initiatives or by funders	Traditionally viewed as impartial and better positioned to report objectively on program strengths and weaknesses and to what extent goals are achieved	Do not always have a nuanced understanding of the cultural, social, and political context that would lead to more-relevant evaluation questions and increase the chances of findings being useful to the program and community
	Can employ sophisticated data collection and analysis methods that fall outside the capacity of most program stakeholders	Power differentials, especially with participants from marginalized communities, can impede open and honest dialogue, leading to misleading or incomplete data
	Evaluation is often situated within the larger base of relevant research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can compare program outcomes and impacts to other programs or models • Can address larger questions of interest to the field 	
PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES Staff and leaders play central roles in designing and carrying out evaluation, with or without the help of a professional evaluator.	Can strengthen evaluation design and increase impact by requiring deliberate collaboration with other stakeholders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capitalizes on participants' nuanced understanding of cultural, social, and political context, often inaccessible to external evaluators • Evaluation questions more likely to address most urgent and relevant issues • Findings more likely to be used to refine program practices and strategy 	Requires major investment of time and attention by program staff, participants, and other stakeholders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be a burden for organizations with small staff and limited budgets, and for participants with many other obligations and pressures
	Can produce better and more thorough data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capitalizes on bonds of trust, especially when collecting personal and sensitive data • Helps minimize potential reluctance, due to power differentials between evaluators and people providing the data, to engage in honest and open dialogue, especially in historically marginalized communities 	Requires strong trust, collaborative norms, and careful attention to assembling an evaluation team that represents multiple groups of stakeholders and attends to power dynamics
	Builds programs' capacity to use data and embed evaluation in ongoing program practice	Funders who are accustomed to more conventional approaches may be skeptical about objectivity and rigor

Developed by the [Parent Leadership Indicators Project](#) at the [Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools](#), the [Parent Leadership Indicators Framework](#) advocates for participatory approaches to the evaluation of parent-leadership initiatives. This useful table illustrates some of the advantages and disadvantages of internal, external, and participatory forms of evaluation. Source: *Evaluation for Equity Measuring What Matters in Parent Leadership Initiatives* by Sara McAlister Joanna Geller

Participatory Action Research and Evaluation Methods

As Bradbury and Reason discuss above, participatory action research is “not so much a *methodology* as an *orientation to inquiry*.” That said, participatory action researchers and evaluators utilize a wide variety of formal and informal research methods, whether it’s *quantitative* research methods such as statistical analyses or *qualitative* methods such as observations of group interactions that are documented and analyzed to reveal themes, patterns, and insights.

Regardless of the specific method being used, a participatory action research or evaluation process always includes stakeholders—i.e., those who are involved, served, or affected—in the design and execution of the process.

A few common methods include:

- Structured one-on-one interviews that may use a standard protocol and questionnaire.
- Facilitated small-group or focus-group conversations with stakeholders (in some cases, PAR focus groups will include representatives of a single stakeholder group, such as students, while in other cases the participants will be selected from multiple groups).
- Facilitated dialogues or community forums with larger groups of stakeholders in which opinions, ideas, or recommendations are documented.
- Stakeholder surveys, especially surveys that include open-ended responses that allow respondents to describe their viewpoints or surveys that are design, executed, and analyzed by members of the groups being surveyed.
- Observations of relevant activities such as teacher-student or teacher-parent interactions using a standardized observation process or set of criteria.
- Group processes that identify and document—sometimes using illustrations, diagrams, or maps—school, community, or organizational problems, resources, or cultural dynamics.
- Analyses of documents such as reports, policies, curricula, news coverage, or stakeholder narratives.
- Photo, video, or audio documentaries and oral histories produced by stakeholders.
- Historical and ethnographic inquiries.

Participatory Action Research Strategies

Given that participatory action research can take a wide variety of forms, any concise description—such those above—is likely to omit important elements or methods. The following descriptions will help illustrate a few common features of participatory action research—features that also apply to participatory forms of evaluation.

To help put these features in context, the descriptions below also include case examples that illustrate how a PAR process might work in a real-world educational context. In this hypothetical case, a public school—"Sample High School"—is exploring new ways to approach student discipline because behavioral problems and disciplinary rates have been increasing for a few years.

1. PAR includes stakeholders in most or all aspects of the process.

In a participatory action research process, those who are affected by a problem, served by a public program, or employed by an organization have roles in each stage of the project's execution. For example, participating stakeholders will be involved in the initial identification of the problem to be studied; the design of the research process or methods; the collection, documentation, and analysis of data; and the implementation of new approaches that result from the insights, lessons, and findings that emerge from the research. A participatory action research process is fundamentally inclusive and democratic, and the most effective projects involve a diverse and representative cross-section of staff and stakeholders.

CASE EXAMPLE: Historically, Sample High School administrators made unilateral decisions about disciplinary policies and their enforcement based on social traditions, subjective perceptions of what worked or didn't work, and an incomplete understanding of the causes of student behavioral problems, which were often based on flawed assumptions about students and families. As a result, disciplinary policies and practices sometimes changed, but the results of those policies only worsened over time. Once the problem became too severe to ignore any longer, the school's administrative team decided to use a participatory action research process to help them better understand the problem. The administrators began by enlisting a team of student, teacher, and family representatives to help them develop and execute a plan.

2. PAR is conducted *with* participants, not *on* participants.

In a participatory action research process, students, parents, or community members—i.e., those who would be viewed as "subjects" in a traditional research study—are enlisted as "co-researchers." In a PAR process, community participants become collaborative researchers who either work alongside professional researchers and evaluators, or they become community-based leaders of an action-research project that involves other community members. The insights that emerge from a PAR process are therefore the products of a working collaboration, rather than the products of professional researchers working independently of those being observed and studied.

CASE EXAMPLE: Rather than simply change disciplinary policies in the school—and hope they produce better results—Sample High School's administrators and stakeholder PAR team instead decided to develop a deeper understanding of why existing disciplinary policies were not working. The

PAR team collaborated with a nearby university, and students, teachers, and family volunteers received training in group facilitation, data collection techniques, survey methods, and other action research techniques. The PAR team then developed a set of research questions that they posed to students, parents, and staff during focus-group discussions and in an online survey. A significant percentage of the school's student, staff, and family population was ultimately involved in the process as a leadership-team member, focus-group facilitator, or study participant.

3. PAR is “transformative rather than merely informative” (Baldwin, 2012).

The goal of a participatory action research process is to improve a program, process, or practice or to solve real-world problems. In many cases, participatory action researchers will begin to address a problem during the execution of a PAR process, or they will immediately use PAR findings to change their school, community, or organization after the process is completed. The term *action* refers to the transformative goals of PAR, the active involvement of participants, and the real-world actions taken by participants during and after a PAR process. While the resulting “actions” may be tangible changes in policies, programs, or practices, a fundamental transformation in the beliefs, perceptions, or worldviews of the people involved is another common result of PAR. For example, people may realize that their perceptions of a community group are based on biased assumptions or they may recognize that issues they formerly considered to be personal problems, such as poverty or low academic achievement resulting from families and students not working hard enough, are linked systemic causes in society.

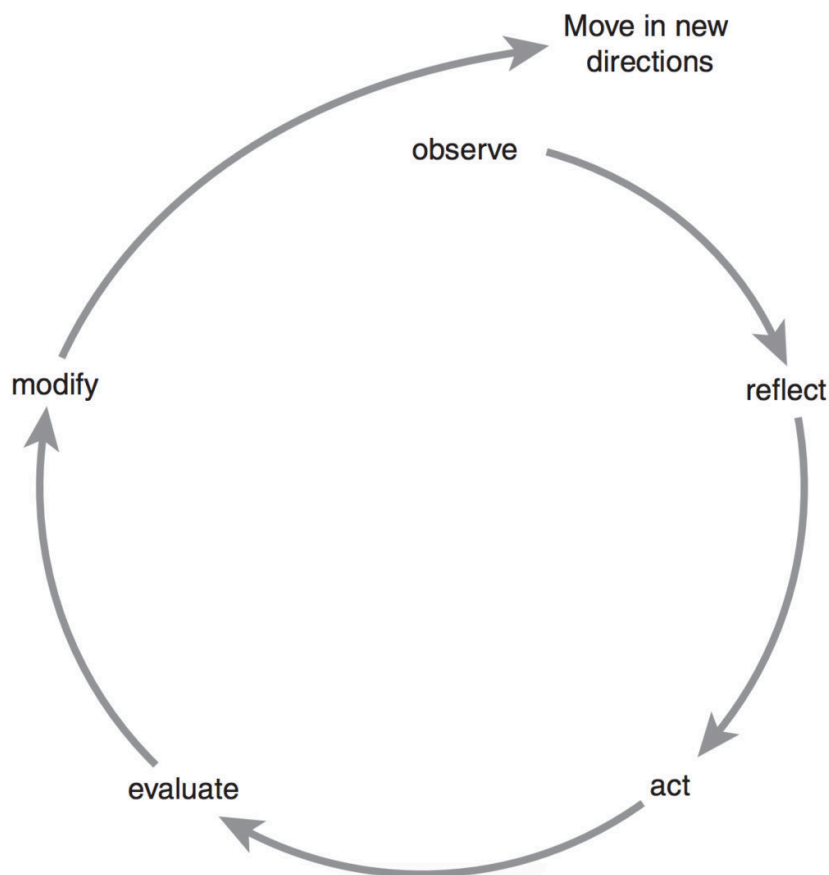
CASE EXAMPLE: When Sample High School's students, families, educators, and administrators came together to analyze and interpret the PAR data, each group gained a new and more nuanced understanding of the problem—and of each other. It also became apparent that several relatively simple adjustments could be made to existing discipline policies and practices to improve interactions between students and educators. As these improvements were implemented, the PAR team continued to collect and study discipline data, while also educating themselves about alternative disciplinary practices that had been effective in other schools.

4. PAR is often conducted in cycles.

While a participatory action research process may have a defined start and end, PAR is often a *method of ongoing practice and reflection*. In these cases, PAR may follow a cyclical process of observation, reflection, action, evaluation, and modification (see image below), with each cycle yielding new insights or improvements. Similarly, participatory action research may also take the form of a series of connected research projects with defined start and end dates that cumulatively build on each other over time. PAR often begins with “small” cycles that address comparatively minor questions or problems before participants move on to more complex or consequential issues. PAR processes nearly always include stages of reflection, evaluation, or critical analysis, which extends to personal reflection

and self-criticism—not just critical inquiry about external policies, programs, or practices. It is important to note that researchers and practitioners have developed numerous PAR models, and that different PAR models may recommend different stages or methods.

CASE EXAMPLE: Because Sample High School’s PAR data indicated that policy changes alone were unlikely to eliminate the problems surfaced during the focus-group conversations and survey, the PAR Team decided to follow a cyclical process of observation, reflection, action, evaluation, and modification. Over time, the school introduced policy modifications, a new staff training program, and alternative disciplinary practices, which resulted in a year-over-year decrease in behavioral problems and disciplinary referrals.



According to Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, “Action research aims to be a disciplined, systematic process” in which action researchers follow a cycle of observation, reflection, action, evaluation, and modification. Rather than a closed circle that would illustrate a repeating process, however, a cycle of action research is more accurately represented as a spiraling coil that takes groups, organizations, and communities in new directions. Source: McNiff & Whitehead, *All You Need to Know About Action Research*.

5. PAR empowers participants by building their knowledge, skills, confidence, or agency.

In a traditional researcher-researched relationship, the researcher is typically a highly trained professional who determines the goals of the process, how the process is conducted, and how the findings are interpreted, presented, or used. In this traditional scenario, researchers improve their skills, gain the most insights, and enhance their professional credentials—and they may also be the only individuals participating in a study who are compensated for their time.

In a PAR process, however, school, community, or organizational participants are given opportunities to acquire new skills and knowledge, and they are often compensated for their time, which can build their power, confidence, and personal sense of agency in a variety of ways. For example, participants may develop a deeper understanding of how their organization or community works, learn new skills that can be used in civic or professional settings, gain insights that help them more effectively advocate for themselves or for a cause, or acquire new information that reveals how they are being disadvantaged or exploited by existing policies or systems. Many advocates of PAR contend that the self-empowerment of stakeholders should not just be a side effect of a PAR process—it should be an explicit goal.

CASE EXAMPLE: Through their involvement in the action-research process, Sample High School's students, teachers, and family members were able to connect disciplinary issues in the school to broader social issues related to policing, mass incarceration, racism, and poverty. Over time, the perceived source of the problem shifted: rather than focusing their disciplinary efforts on changing student behaviors, the school decided to enact policies and practices that countered—rather than exacerbated—broader social forces. Members of the PAR team not only gained new research, facilitation, reflection, and data-analysis skills, but they were also motivated to share what they learned during school-board meetings and community forums, which led to them acquiring new skills and confidence as advocates, presenters, and public speakers. In addition, multiple members of the PAR team decided to become more involved in their school and community, and two members decided to run for open school-board seats in the next election cycle.

6. PAR assumes that perfect neutrality and objectivity do not exist in social contexts.

Participatory action research is based on the premise that all knowledge is socially constructed, and that knowledge reflects the biases, priorities, or concerns of those who create it. Consequently, those who control how knowledge is produced or understood can exert power over those who do not participate in the creation of that knowledge. Because new knowledge or information is socially produced, it can also perpetuate harmful social behaviors such as stereotyping or discrimination. Participatory action research can therefore challenge, mitigate, or disrupt real or potential social problems by including historically marginalized, disadvantaged, silenced, or oppressed groups in production of new knowledge—knowledge that, as a result of their participation, is more likely to

reflect their cultural experiences, perspectives, priorities, and concerns.

CASE EXAMPLE: During the PAR team’s focus groups, Sample High School’s administrators and educators were surprised, and occasionally even shocked, by what they learned from participants. They realized that the home lives of their students and families were far more difficult than they had assumed; that behavioral problems often began with stressful situations outside of school; that teachers didn’t have training or clear guidance on how to manage behavioral problems productively; and that many parents were looking for strategies to reduce the stress their children were experiencing inside and outside of school. School leaders began to see that policies and practices designed to control student behavior, rather than show respect and compassion, were contributing to the problem. School leaders also realized that they did not have the capacity or expertise to address some of the problems identified during the focus groups, and that they needed to enlist assistance from outside organizations and agencies.

HOW IS THIS APPROACH DIFFERENT FROM EVALUATION AS USUAL?

Traditional Evaluation	Culturally responsive, participatory evaluation (CRPE)	Examples of CRPE in the Parent Leadership Indicators Project
Evaluators identify which outcomes matter.	Outcomes are defined collaboratively with those closest to the program (e.g. parents, program staff), ensuring that they are meaningful to organizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Theory of Change, indicator framework, and Parent Leader Outcome Survey were co-created with parent leaders, parent leadership initiative staff, funders, and fellow evaluators and researchers.
Evaluators make all of the decisions related to the evaluation.	Evaluators support those closest to the program to collect, analyze, use, and communicate data, thus building their ownership and capacity .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PLIs received training in qualitative evaluation from Project Impact. Algorhythm is creating an online learning system to enable PLIs to view and use survey data in real time.
Evaluators wait for issues related to equity, power, and access to emerge organically.	Evaluators make explicit issues of equity, power, and access .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With an intersectional approach, we are interrogating which groups (e.g. by race, gender, education, language, etc.) have access to and benefit most from PLIs. In-depth interviews and storytelling enable parents to share impact in their own voices.

The [Parent Leadership Indicators Framework](#) is informed by an approach to evaluation called Culturally Responsive Participatory Evaluation (CRPE), which actively involves parent leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds in the collection and analysis of evaluation data, which includes the creation of survey instruments, interview protocols, and other research and evaluation tools. The involvement of parents in the evaluation process can help helps build greater understanding and excitement about the value of evaluation, and it enhances the likelihood that organizations will make changes in response to evaluation findings. Source: Parent Leadership Indicators Project

7. PAR challenges traditional hierarchies and power dynamics.

Because a participatory action research process erodes the distinction between *researcher* and *researched*, it can challenge the assumptions or biases of researchers and leaders, just as it disrupts the traditional distinction between those who produce new knowledge and those who might either benefit from or be harmed by that knowledge. In some cases, the separation of researcher and researched can lead to a variety of negative outcomes, such as the wrong problems being studied (due to biased and flawed assumptions made by researchers), or the manipulation of research findings for the purposes of maintaining power, misrepresenting opponents, or advancing an agenda that may not be in the public interest.

Some advocates of participatory action research contend that when school, community, or organizational stakeholders are not involved in the production of new knowledge, the resulting information and interpretations are more likely to be inaccurate, misrepresented, or abused by those who control its production. In this way, PAR is often one of many strategies used to advance greater equity, justice, transparency, or accountability in programs, organizations, and public institutions such as schools. A PAR process is also intentional about acknowledging and disrupting inequalities of power among team members. For example, a PAR team might engage in an open conversation about how power and privilege affects their group's dynamics and decisions, and about how they might structure their working partnership to ensure equity of voice, leadership, and decision-making.

CASE EXAMPLE: By giving up some degree of control over the research and decision-making process, and allowing their long-held professional assumptions to be challenged, Sample High School's administrators not only became more informed about the problem, but they felt more motivated and empowered to address it. While the conversations were emotionally difficult for everyone involved at times, the PAR process ultimately helped administrators, teachers, students, and families learn how to be more honest and vulnerable with one another. Even though administrators felt uncomfortable and defensive at first, especially when students expressed their feelings about the school's disciplinary policy or described their experience of being disciplined, the process resulted in a much clearer understanding of their students and families, which helped the administrative team build stronger and more meaningful relationships with their community that also led to positive changes in other school policies, programs, and practices.

Participatory Action Research and Evaluation Challenges

As with any approach to research or evaluation, participatory forms of action research and evaluation are the subject of debates and criticisms, while the efficacy or outcomes of a particular PAR or PE

process are often determined by how well or poorly it's designed and implemented.

The following descriptions illustrate some of the challenges commonly encountered by local leaders, organizers, or practitioners implementing a PAR, YPAR, or PE process:

- Participatory approaches to research and evaluation may require more time, funding, or staffing to execute than other inquiry processes, given that inclusive processes involving larger groups of people generally require more preparation, outreach, coordination, and relationship-building.
- Participatory approaches may produce a large amount of data and documentation that requires time, funding, or human capacity to analyze.
- Participants in a PAR or PE process may require training in specialized skills such as group facilitation, formal observation, or data collection.
- Schools, communities, or organizations may not have the experience, capacity, or training required to work with stakeholders in ways that are authentically democratic, collaborative, inclusive, equitable, and non-hierarchical.
- Participants may express viewpoints that are uncomfortable, controversial, or contentious, or that challenge the perspectives, privilege, and authority of those in power, which may require skilled facilitation to constructively and equitably navigate.
- Participatory approaches may require leaders, coordinators, and facilitators to interact across cultural differences such as race, nationality, ideology, language, or disability, and leaders, organizers, and practitioners may not have the training or skills in cross-cultural sensitivity and communication required to navigate cultural divides in productive ways.
- Cultural biases may implicitly or explicitly shape the design and execution of a PAR or PE process in ways that are inequitable or exclusionary, which might then silence certain viewpoints or produce misrepresentative data. Participants may not have the experience or training required to recognize when a process is biased or flawed, for example, and the use of the "PAR" or "PE" labels may inadvertently legitimize misrepresentative data or inadvisable actions that do not serve the interests of stakeholders.
- A participatory process may be manipulated by administrators, directors, managers, or others with authority and influence in a school, organization, or community. In these cases, leaders may express the desire to undertake an authentic PAR or PE process, but then subvert it in either small or significant ways to maintain control, silence viewpoints, suppress criticism (including legitimate criticism), or advance an agenda that may not be in the best interests of participants and stakeholders.
- Those in power may not see the value or benefits of participatory approaches to research and evaluation; they may become defensive or hostile about giving up control and decision-making authority; or they may not have the self-reflection or self-criticism skills required to lead or support an authentic PAR process.
- Participatory approaches may also create frustration, anger, or resentment among participants, particularly if they are led to believe their views will be heard and acted on, but leaders with power and authority decline to implement the community ideas or

recommendations that result from the process.

Acknowledgments

Organizing Engagement thanks Joanna Geller of the **Parent Leadership Indicators Project** at the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools for her contributions to developing and improving this introduction.

References

Baldwin, M. (2012). [Participatory action research](#). In M. Grey, J. Midgley, & S.A. Webb. (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social work*. (pp. 467–482). London: Sage Publications.

Cousins, B. J., & Whitmore, E. (1998). [Framing participatory evaluation](#). *New Directions for Evaluation*, 80, p. 5-23.

Danley, K.S. & Ellison, M.L. (1999). “[A handbook for participatory action researchers](#)” in *Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center Publications and Presentations*. Boston: Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation Sargent College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at Boston University. **Illustration*

McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2011). [All you need to know about action research](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. **Illustration*

Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.). (2008). [The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice](#). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sagor, R. (2000). [Guiding school improvement with action research](#). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Creative Commons



This work by Organizing Engagement is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). When excerpting, adapting, or republishing content from this resource, users should cite the source texts and confirm that all quotations and excerpts are accurately presented.