

The “Accidental” Advocate: Wearing Two Hats as Researcher and Advocate to Reach Young Children

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This is the story of how I learned to conduct the type of research that is respected by my academic peers, yet also informs local community action and promotes social change.

One of the first lessons I learned in graduate school was that as social science researchers, we had to be objective in order to be credible. I was encouraged to write my term papers, thesis, and dissertation without the dramatic and argumentative language I learned to use in my previous life as an appellate law clerk in the Children’s Court in Los Angeles County. It was difficult for me to learn to be dispassionate in my writing, especially while my research interests in early childhood development were driven by a profound, passionate interest in the well-being of our most vulnerable. So I learned the scientific process of designing studies, collecting data, and analyzing data in a way that met our field’s rigorous standards for conducting research. I consoled myself by reasoning that hopefully others would use my research findings to advocate on behalf of young children and their families.

Over the past eight years, I developed a strong research agenda that necessitated going into the communities where children, families and child care professionals lived and worked. For me, this meant becoming intimately familiar with low-income communities in South Central Los Angeles and, most currently, low-income neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. It was important to me that I kept in touch with the real challenges faced by practitioners and families when it comes to preparing very low-income children for school and for life. As such, I paid close attention to community trends involving caregiving arrangements in the wake of welfare reform. I was eager to ask the kinds of questions that were not normally addressed by other scholars in the field of early care and education. This probing led me toward discovering a whole new way of conducting research.

Action-Oriented Research

I came to understand that my research collaborations with community agencies had a name – “action-oriented research.” In these collaborations, we generated research questions that were relevant to their efforts to improve the quality of life for the children and families they served, and I was still able to generate sound scientific knowledge about young children’s development. Indeed the purpose of action-oriented research is to generate knowledge that can be used to address practical concerns of local communities, organizations, and groups, and then incorporate local understandings of specific practices and issues (Small & Utall, 2005). Action-oriented research projects can focus on any issue or concern and usually have some type of change as an ultimate goal. This approach almost always involves a form of collaboration between researchers and community partners. (See Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003, for a detailed review of common principles and assumptions about action-oriented research.)

Working with Family, Friend and Neighbor Child Care

The most recent and relevant example of my action-oriented research approach involves my work with informal, unlicensed child care providers (sometimes referred to as kith and kin providers or family, friend and neighbor providers). Although this may be the oldest and most widespread form of child care, Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) child care has received very little attention from either researchers or policy makers. The virtual absence of a body of research on this type of care has made it difficult to assess the likely consequences for parents and for children's well-being. I am one of a core group of researchers studying FFN child care and raising awareness and interest in informal providers and the young children in their care.

In 1999, while still in graduate school, I was fortunate enough to work with a community child care agency led by two visionary African American women. They had the foresight to obtain grant money that enabled them to design and implement an outreach and support project for FFN child care providers in South Central Los Angeles. I was hired as their evaluator. Over the years, my evaluations became more and more complex and in-depth. My involvement with this agency culminated with my dissertation project, which is one of the largest studies to date examining quality and observing children's social and emotional outcomes in informal child care settings, i.e., grandma's house. The findings from this project have led me to raise awareness of the issues facing this group of child care providers. I have presented my research findings at numerous meetings, conferences and roundtables involving local community policy boards, state administrators, and federal child care policy makers.

After I graduated and moved to Pittsburgh, I was excited about the prospect of writing more grants and continuing my program of research with informal providers. In fact, one of the first things I did after moving to the "steel-city" was to meet with the directors of the child care information services in order to determine exactly what percentage of parents eligible for child care subsidies were selecting FFN child care settings for their children. I was not surprised to find the trend was similar to Los Angeles – over 60% of parents who received child care subsidies were choosing to place their young children in FFN child care. However, I was surprised to find that there was only one very, very small project in Allegheny County designed to provide outreach and support to these providers. Members of the child care leadership in the city informed me that there were many prevailing negative views about these providers and the likelihood of success if such outreach programs were implemented.

Why Advocate?

I was unsure how to conduct my research without any community agencies that worked directly with FFN child care providers. I decided that if I wanted to continue a rich program of research involving FFN child care providers, I would have to work with community agencies to create outreach and support programs. I reasoned that understanding the impact of training and technical assistance for FFN child care providers is one of the key research policy questions, and working with agencies to *create* such programs could be included as a new part of my action-oriented research agenda. I was already inspired by other states' efforts in creating policies and programs that support FFN child care providers, so I had a strong vision that guided my efforts. I also felt very strongly about the paradigm used by many applied developmental psychologists – if we truly want to understand and enhance the development of young, low income children of

color, we need to support the children where they are – not wait for the children to come to our labs or wait until they enter school.

Combining Advocacy & Research Strategies

I started spending a lot of time talking to various community agencies to build awareness and excitement about the need for outreach and support programs for FFN child care providers. I tried to keep an open mind about possible community partners and not limit myself to the types of agencies that typically tend to outreach to FFN providers in other states. I helped several agencies write grant proposals for funding, and I provided several agencies with curriculum content suggestions for their FFN child care training programs.

I also obtained some funding of my own to conduct a pilot research project. I found that while recruitment of FFN child care providers for my project was my biggest challenge, it was also the strongest avenue for advocacy and increasing awareness. While going from agency to agency to solicit help in reaching and recruiting child care providers for my study, two things happened: First, I introduced many agencies to the issues surrounding FFN child care providers and the parents who selected this type of care, and encouraged these agencies to consider allocating part of their funding and attention to these issues. Second, I simultaneously kept track of other individuals and groups who were proponents of FFN child care, and I worked to connect these agencies and individuals with each other; thereby, slowly building an infrastructure of support for this child care issue.

I also continued to disseminate results and findings from FFN child care research locally and nationally. However, sharing this information locally was more of a challenge. In the past couple of years, I have attended many meetings where local child care leaders and advocates were present. When I first started sharing information about my research and other successful projects going on in other states, I could often feel the resistance. With every opportunity, I used evidence from the field and my passion for the issue to chip away at those walls and dispel negative attitudes and ideas about FFN child care providers and their desire for support and assistance. It is clear that attitudes are slowly changing, and that there are now efforts underway to at least *consider* allocating some public funding to support and train FFN child care providers in the county and state.

Success: Step-by-Step

My successes have come in small, but significant, steps. I now have more data to add to the literature base on FFN child care, and a local data set that can be used as the basis for why we need local programs. I have also continued to make meaningful connections in the Pittsburgh community. In addition to the early childhood education and development agencies, I have also created partnerships with public health agencies, libraries, and inter-generational programs. The over-arching objective we all have is the recognition that by providing support and assistance to FFN child care providers, we will be impacting the developmental outcomes of young children in a positive way.

Lessons Learned in Local Advocacy

- Do not be afraid to let your professional identity shift. Shifting into advocacy-mode can enhance what you already do. I have added more energy and passion to my research responsibilities by incorporating community advocacy.
- Be prepared for people to see you in a different light – Sometimes others’ perception of you can be positive (e.g., “She’s really in touch with “the people!”); sometimes it is not so positive (e.g., I occasionally get pigeon-holed as a rebel, and some have interpreted my efforts as a personal attack against their ways of conducting “business as usual.”).
- Be prepared to give people some time and space to change their minds and hearts about the issue for which you are advocating. Practice grace by allowing others to shift their attitudes about the issue in question.
- Believe in the power and the truth of what you have seen and what you know! Often, the evidence and research findings speak for themselves.
- Find ways to inspire yourself.

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Dr. Shivers was also a ZERO to THREE Leaders for the 21st Century Fellow, Class of 2005. She received her PhD from UCLA in 2003 in Psychological Studies in Education, and also holds a law degree from Howard University School of Law.

Dr. Shivers' research includes a concentrated focus and expertise on the interplay between development, culture, poverty, and community. More specifically, her research interests include: child care quality issues, social and emotional development of low-income children of color, effective early education in low-income communities of color, cultural continuity between home and school, child care workforce issues, and other issues surrounding culture and development.

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