



# A Model of Action Research for Advancing Community-University Partnerships

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**ACTION-RESEARCH**



## **ABSTRACT**

This article describes a four-phased action research project that emerged over a six-year period, eventually leading to a \$600,000 investment by local government in a new neighborhood park. We demonstrate, through our community-university partnership, how we built on each phase of action research initially by establishing and developing relationships, increasing participation levels in the neighborhood organization and neighborhood sponsored events, and building long-term participation, which enabled the establishment of a collective vision. This ultimately led to increased social capital and strengthened local power through political voice. We argue that by connecting four phases of action research, we were able to achieve significant community change in partnership with local neighborhood residents and that this form of a long-term and multi-based approach can address some of the common challenges inherent to community-university partnerships.

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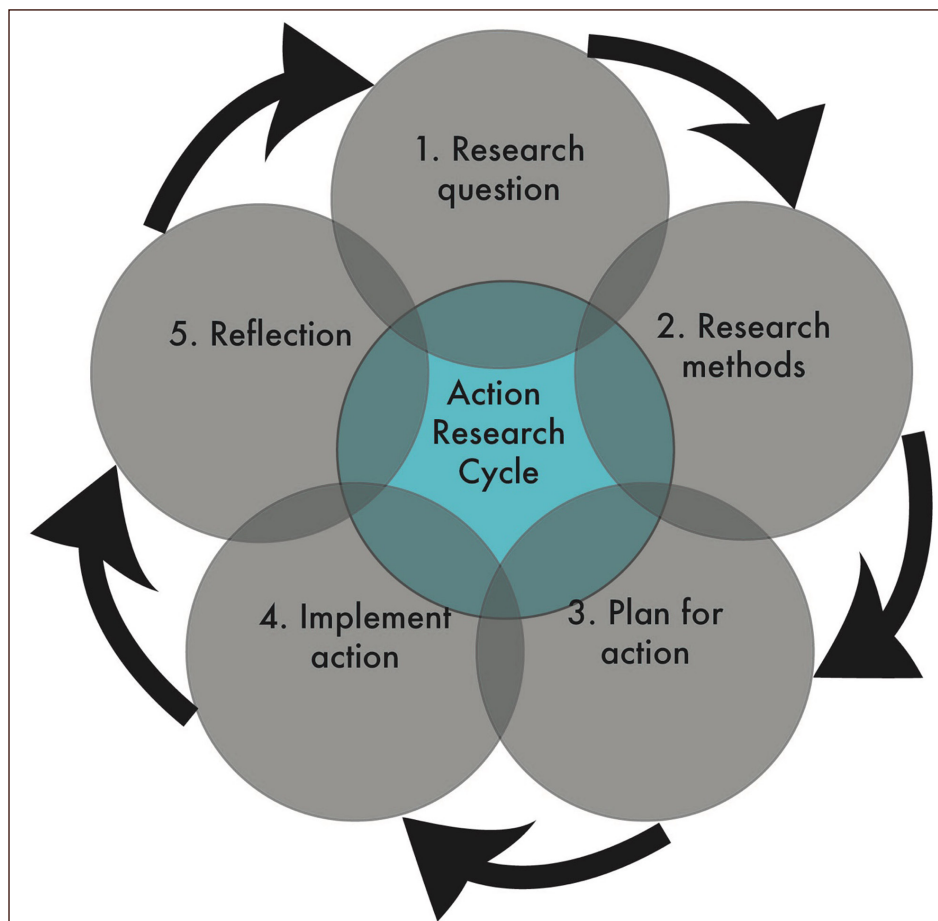
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This article describes a four-phased action research project as it developed over a six-year time span. The model that we share has direct implications to the practice of community-university partnerships that aim to advance local community control. The project results from a close partnership between university faculty, graduate students, and residents of the Reid Park neighborhood, which is a low-income neighborhood located in West Charlotte. This community-university partnership has produced several tangible benefits on the ground, the most significant being a \$600,000 investment by Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation (MCPR) to build a new park within the community. The purpose of the article is to share a model of action research based on Bodorkós and Pataki's (2009) model (see **Figure 1**) that demonstrates the power of implementing multiple cycles of action research to achieve larger scale community outcomes within the context of a community-university partnership. A central strategy of this initiative is our ability to connect multiple university courses and student projects to local community partners' needs. This paper illustrates a process that evolved over several years of continued engagement starting in 2009 (Bengle & Sorensen, 2017). Our intention is to encourage the adaptation of this model in settings similar to those in our partner community.

## PLACING OUR WORK WITHIN THE LITERATURE AND METHODS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Our understanding of action research stems from the work of Bradbury and others. Bradbury (2015) defines action research as “a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation” that “brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern” (p. 1). In other words, action research as we apply it, is a deliberative approach to problem-solving in collaboration with community members who are directly impacted by a particular issue characterized by inequality. We work with community members to jointly define problems and, through processes of data collection and analysis, we collaboratively identify a course of action to remedy the issue. It is this active process of engagement that distinguishes action research from applied research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007).

Community-university partnerships are fertile ground for action research because, as academics, we are tasked with translating theory into practice and with reflecting on our practice to further inform theory. This reflective practice benefits learning outcomes for students, faculty and community partners. Looking back at the



**Figure 1** Action Research Model.  
Adapted from Bodorkós and Pataki (2009).

longstanding partnership, one of major reflection has been that in order for action research to address complex social problems, it must strategically build upon iterative phases of action research. The significance of this realization led to the development of this manuscript so that others might benefit from an intentional approach to partnership. While the steps of action research are well demonstrated in the existing literature, our novel contribution to research on community-university partnerships and action research is our identification and characterization of four original phases of action research. We document distinct phases that build on each other to develop neighborhood power (as illustrated in **Figure 2**), therefore advancing local community control. In Phase I, our model leverages action research to build relationships with community members. From here, we progress to increasing participation. We then develop a collective vision in Phase III, and in Phase IV, we build power to affect community change. This intentional strategy of long-term engagement and capacity building also helps sustain community-university partnerships, a key challenge that is noted throughout the literature. If indeed action research is to produce transformational knowledge and liberation (Bradbury, 2015), then one long-term goal of any action research project should be to develop the power of individuals and groups to change their circumstances, to improve their communities and to shape their futures.

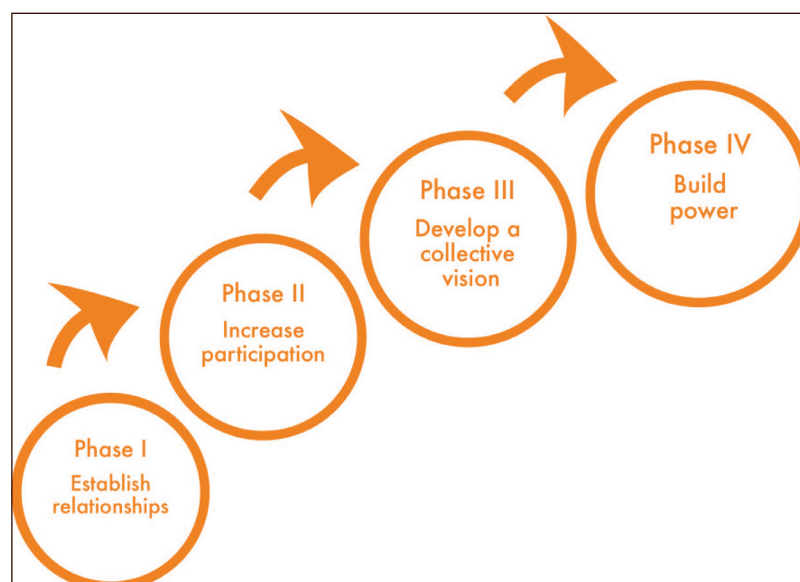
Our model of action research for advancing local community control is the focus of the remainder of this paper and our key contribution to the literature on community- university partnerships. This model has the potential to guide future community- university partnerships towards larger scale tangible outcomes for community partners where initial participation is low and capacity is limited. Our work, in hindsight, benefitted from our on-going engagement and from what Goldsmith

(1998) might suggest are the benefits of processes that transfer power from the researcher to citizens. In other words,

interventions are likely to be more lasting when they lead to direct and immediate empowerment of weaker parties in disputes. This is because empowerment makes people more likely to continue to resist, and to resist again. Thus organizing, or providing technical assistance appears to be more promising when it involves people in the neighborhoods in ways that not only satisfy them, (even if only marginally), but also give them means of demanding (and getting) more. (p. 1220)

In our model, community-university partnerships put community first; we aim to balance traditional relationships between community and university actors such that faculty and students do not simply study a people or place and so that citizen partners (community residents) have the power to set the research agenda. As researchers, we are aware of the need not only to interrogate existing theories in our disciplines but also of the need to dismantle systemic impediments to equitable engagement with our partners. In this sense, a reconstruction of action research must also involve empowerment strategies and an acknowledgement of the often-problematic role that universities have played in their local landscapes.

This is one way that our process begins to stand apart from much of the existing literature focused on action research. By grounding our work in the dynamics of specific places, we have been able to both critically assess how our work can become a venue for neighborhood partners to raise demands and to enable action through an evolving process. This essay is a case in



**Figure 2** Implementation of Four Phases of Action Research.

point: we worked with Reid Park, which is a neighborhood characterized by low initial resident participation, a median household income of \$16,250 and a population that is 91.2% Black (Mecklenburg County and University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2016), with noticeable inequality in education, municipal funding, and access to jobs as compared to the city overall. The neighborhood is on the West side of town, the historical site of industrial land uses and low-income housing. This combination of factors and, as we point out later, the capacity of the neighborhood residents to act for themselves led us to maintain this particular long-term relationship.

Mindful of Arieli et al.'s (2009) "paradox of participation," we understood our work to be tied to interpersonal relationship-building, which often does not look like typical research models in which the researcher and research subject roles remain clearly delineated. We acknowledge that our embedded work blurs traditional research roles with the goal of empowering non-traditional researchers to mobilize their socio-cultural capital (power), to bolster their own problem setting and -solving capacity, and to ultimately develop independence from the academic researchers. This kind of action research is not without its pitfalls; as Arieli et al. (2009) caution, unintended situations can result when "action researchers, acting to actualize participatory and democratic values, unintentionally impose participatory methods upon partners who are either unwilling or unable to act as researchers" (p. 275). This article will point out how those tensions were experienced and addressed in partnership.

## **SITUATING OURSELVES IN THE RESEARCH**

As engaged scholars we believe that universities have an inherent commitment to their local communities (Boyer, 1996). This drives us to offer our skills, knowledge, and resources such as students' time and labor, grant writing, etc., to collaborate with our local communities on pressing concerns, while also bringing to that practice an intentional approach of action and reflection. Our work in Reid Park initially emerged through the efforts of the Charlotte Action Research Project (CHARP) to establish relationships with partner groups where students could engage in service- and community-based learning. Through a contract with the City of Charlotte Neighborhood and Business Services department, CHARP was assigned to Reid Park to provide technical assistance to neighborhood leaders and city staff persons to support community development. Underlying this was residents' distrust of the city and university.

Authors Bengle and Morrell are White women and students at the start of this research; both were pursuing a Master's degree in Geography and Urban Regional

Analysis. Bengle had lived in the Charlotte metropolitan area for a decade, teaching in low-income high minority schools during that time. Her undergraduate degree is in Visual Arts, and she had no prior experience working in community settings. Morrell was new to the Charlotte area. She had a BA in Secondary Education and had taught in a mid-sized city in a demographically diverse middle school. Bengle was assigned to the neighborhood as part of a class project and Morrell was assigned to work in the neighborhood through a Graduate Assistantship with CHARP. In many ways this early student driven model was to the advantage of the partnership, as students are often viewed as less powerful than university faculty and community members tend to be understanding of the learning process. As both authors acknowledged to the community their limited expertise and openness to learning from the community a more balanced relationship was established from the start. The expectation of community members mentoring students, while beneficial to establish power balance, also has the flipside of being a significant expectation on the part of the university given that community members are volunteering their time to work with students as opposed to faculty members who might bring more developed skills and knowledge to the table.

Sorensen is also a White woman and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences at the time of this research. She was new to Charlotte, the university, and faculty rank. Her experience in action research and community-university partnerships stemmed from her work with the East St. Louis Action Research Project where she progressed from doctoral student—as a foreign exchange student—to staff person. Gámez is Latinx and was an Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the start of this research. His experience grew out of the use of urban design coursework as a venue for community engagement. This often took the form of community design charrettes that led to vision plans for communities, groups, and organizations.

## **METHODS**

To develop the four-phased model, we reviewed participant observation notes from our six years of partnership with Reid Park and studied our published manuscripts and neighborhood reports developed collaboratively with residents. Graduate student projects, including two Master's thesis projects and one PhD dissertation, and other student work from Geography and Architecture courses were also used to inform the model. Using this material, we created a list of all events where we partnered with Reid Park beginning in 2009. From this, we generated a timeline and coded each component of our work according to the five stages of action research.

	RESEARCH QUESTION	RESEARCH METHODS	PLAN FOR ACTION	IMPLEMENT ACTION	REFLECTION
Phase I	- What are pressing neighborhood concerns? - Assets?	- Survey - Asset mapping - Interviews - Historical documents	- Identify four neighborhood goals	- Pride Walk Senior Luncheon	- Limited participation (need broader input) - Focus on building social capital
Phase II	- What are the barriers to participation in Reid Park?	- Interview with key stakeholders - Visioning workshop - Literature review	- Rebuilding neighborhood association	- Form steering committee - Board election and new bylaws - KaBooM!	- Participation broadened but capacity is still limited
Phase III	- How do public amenities differ?	- Interviews - Historical documents - Funding records	- Community engagement for park planning	- Develop park vision plan	- Build neighborhood power
Phase IV	- How do we implement park vision?	- Community mapping - Funding Tree	- Plan for oral history project	- Oral history - Organize at City Hall	- Coalition building to help sustain power

**Table 1** Phases of Reid Park Partnership.

With analysis of the timeline, a model for integrating multiple phases of action research emerged (see **Table 1**).

## PRE-PARTNERSHIP THOUGHTS

Each of these four phases requires capacity building, which can translate to an increased ability of community partners to harness their own social capital, voice and socio-political power. Reid Park quickly distinguished itself as a neighborhood that was very aware of challenges facing the neighborhood and with a clear sense of the justice and policy issues tied to those challenges. Historically, there had been committed community leaders, and a tradition of organizing though participant numbers had dwindled to just one active leader at the start of our partnership. In the late 1980s, residents had formed a community development corporation that would later fall due to financial trouble and limited support from the city. Long before the initiation of the partnership and our first collaborations, neighborhood efforts to develop a new park had begun. Planning documents dating back to 1991 prioritized a new neighborhood park. Concerns with the neighborhood's original park focused on safety; as noted in park district reports, the proposed location was "secluded and heavily wooded. It's trails and picnic shelters are seldom used because of the park's seclusion and resident's concern with personal security" (Mecklenburg County Planning Commission, 1991, p. 12). Leaders never lost sight of their initial goals, including a new neighborhood park.

## PHASE I BUILD RELATIONSHIPS: START FROM THE GROUND UP

Community-university partnerships require trust and relationship building. As described by Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire (2003):

building trust in communities that have every reason to be wary of outsiders and especially of academic outsiders doing research is a long-term project...but the impact of the project on the community and the richness of the insights generated in their work together are testament to the value of such patience. (p. 12)

Relationship building began with the work of several graduate and undergraduate courses over a two-year period with data collection, neighborhood planning, and events the university helped facilitate. In fact, events played a key role in our early efforts as these provided opportunities to build relationships within the community, to illustrate that small acts can have significant results, and to build momentum towards larger goals. This is one area where we had to yield to the priorities of the neighborhood, demonstrating we were ready to jump in and begin work on physical improvements. This was important to relationship and trust building, a core challenge of community-university partnerships, especially in low-income neighborhoods (Howarth, et al., 2017). While the goals of academics are often met by generating data and writing reports, achieving neighborhood goals from the partnership requires action (Wiewel & Lieber, 1998).

The first phase of action research in our partnership with Reid Park began with an investigation into pressing neighborhood concerns and a survey of neighborhood assets. A team of students was assigned to develop a neighborhood plan in partnership with the neighborhood association. This was the start of an exploratory process to not only learn more about the neighborhood, but, more importantly, to begin to build relationships with residents and provide a vehicle for community voices to be recorded. Tying past goals, such as the neighborhood park, to present concerns was one way to ground the neighborhood plan in the community's collective memory. Moving the neighborhood park to a new

location in the spine of the community was one of the objectives to increase community safety. Neighborhood residents were vocal during neighborhood meetings and one-on-one meetings with students during the planning process. The relationships we built with individuals in this early stage had a lasting impact in the form of our sustained commitment to the partnership.

When we first began our partnership with the community, participation was low. In 2009, it was common for only one to two community members to be present at neighborhood meetings. In the absence of a broad neighborhood presence, students in the Community Planning Workshop (CPW) class used several data collection methods to familiarize themselves with the neighborhood. These methods included windshield surveys, door-to-door surveys, review of historical documents, participant observations, and informal interviews with key leaders. These data were supplemented with sociodemographic data from secondary sources.

In many ways, the recommendations in the neighborhood plan came prematurely as a result of only three months of neighborhood engagement constrained by the semester calendar, a common issue in community-university partnerships (Stoecker, et al., 2010). While the neighborhood planning project allowed students to apply course concepts, its primary contribution to the overall project was that it began to familiarize us with the neighborhood and aided relationship building. In community-university partnerships, trust building is not just getting to know each other, but also means getting to know the neighborhood where action and learning is to take place.

There was background work to do before defining a research problem. For action research to produce significant outcomes, we needed to ensure that the research reflected the needs and priorities of the community; this would be one way to illustrate that residents could have power in shaping initiatives that impact their neighborhood. We needed a better understanding of the history of Reid Park. In response, a history document was compiled by students in a neighborhood planning class the following semester. This was another step in our data collection process to expand our understanding of the community and it strengthened our relationship with Reid Park residents as they shared stories with us, and as we exchanged documents, old newspaper articles, maps, and pictures.

During that time, we assisted Reid Park as they hosted a Pride Walk. This outreach event was designed to support community pride and recruit residents to become active members of the neighborhood association. The Pride Walk was intended to be the first in a series of similar walks, but only one Pride Walk was hosted with limited participation. Although the event was not a success in

a typical sense, it served as a relationship-building tool and enabled a deeper understanding of community issues.

A second action step soon followed. This event, a youth-senior luncheon, was funded by a local grant and supported one of the 2009 neighborhood plan's goal of strengthening relationships between youth and senior residents. Like the Pride Walk and creation of the neighborhood plan with CPW students, the luncheon supported relationships between university students, faculty and community residents.

The events in Phase I allowed us to build relationships within the community-university partnership. However, the low participation at the Pride Walk taught us a valuable lesson as we experienced first-hand the challenges to participation. It became clear that we would need to identify other ways of engagement beyond what we were currently doing, which consisted primarily of distributing flyers in the neighborhood, as well as some door-to-door recruitment. It also highlighted the lack of organizational capacity in the neighborhood at the time and the need to develop strategies for increasing capacity and social capital. In phase one, we had introduced ourselves, collected a lot of information about the neighborhood and talked to a narrow group of residents. It was a start but not enough to achieve neighborhood goals. These reflections led us to Phase II of the model.

## **PHASE II INCREASE PARTICIPATION: PUSHING THE RIGHT BUTTONS**

Phase II of the project sought to understand the barriers to participation in Reid Park. A group of students from a graduate level planning theory class taught by Sorensen, were tasked with investigating what factors prohibited residents from participating in events such as the Pride Walk and neighborhood association meetings. Findings indicated that a microscale approach to increasing social capital in the neighborhood held the best chance of success for empowering residents and increasing participation.

Again, in an attempt to be mindful of the "paradox of participation," we tried a number of creative strategies to engage residents as partners on their terms. For example, neighborhood residents felt disconnected from their neighborhood school and we utilized this sense of disconnection as an opportunity to engage in a dialog between residents and the school as the neighborhood K-8 school developed a neighborhood-school partnership. However, this partnership was not well connected to local residents who repeatedly expressed to us that they had not been engaged in meaningful ways by the K-8 school. To address this, we planned a community-visioning workshop in collaboration with the school but with the clear understanding that it would be led by residents.

The visioning workshop brought together residents and other stakeholders from the existing neighborhood-school partnership including the school principal. Broad participation of residents was ensured by canvassing the neighborhood and knocking on doors and, more importantly, by collectively identifying the relationship with the school as an issue that resonated with the larger community. This issue was meaningful because it exemplified the sense of powerlessness in this and other relationships with institutions Reid Park residents experienced. Given the issue's importance, residents showed up because they saw this as an opportunity to voice their concerns and to set an agenda for meeting with school partners rather than the other way around. This was a moment in which residents could see their collective power in action.

These sentiments are documented in interview and focus group data from Bengle's (2015) dissertation. During the workshop, participants identified strategies for increasing the neighborhood association's role in the neighborhood-school partnership (see **Figure 3**). This included the formation of a steering committee to help develop programs and pursue grant funding. Participants at the visioning workshop also indicated that they wanted to build bridges between school youth and neighborhood seniors and develop a project that would share the history of Reid Park with others.

Following the visioning workshop, we began developing the organizational capacity of the neighborhood

association. Working with a steering committee of five residents that were identified during the workshop, we spent the next several months revising existing bylaws and developing a new executive committee election process. We outlined roles for an executive committee, circulated this information throughout the community and requested nominations for the neighborhood association's executive committee. This process helped to grow the organizational capacity that was necessary for developing a collective vision in Phase III.

We also felt that we needed a neighborhood-wide event that would be attractive to many residents to increase ownership in the process and in turn increase participation. Given the safety concerns with the poorly placed park described earlier, we worked with the neighborhood association to build a new playground in partnership with KABOOM!<sup>1</sup> CHARP helped write two grants to procure funding for the project and provided overall guidance to the neighborhood on how to navigate a complex process that includes documenting match support, organizing meetings, engaging with program officers, etc. Several months of planning went into the event plus two days of construction with the help of a team of volunteers. Multiple committees were formed, and they managed responsibilities for various aspects of the build day like food and scheduling.

Through both the KaBOOM! Project and the visioning workshop, we discovered that it was a matter of finding the right projects to increase neighborhood engagement and that an organized leadership body could help reduce barriers to participation. The high youth population in the neighborhood was likely an impetus for the success of the KABOOM! playground. Another important factor stems from the visibility of the outcome. The playground was assembled in only two days, and although there were several months of planning that led up to the build day, it was evident to participants throughout the process that we were not 'just planning'—there were tangible outcomes that occurred within only a few short months.

The playground demonstrated to the community the growing capacity of the neighborhood association and helped to increase overall faith in the organization. Some community members expressed concerns over the new playground because they were afraid it was a "band-aid" remedy that might draw attention away from the need for a full-service park. However, many families were excited and engaged throughout the process. The playground only filled a small need for recreation in the neighborhood. Our partnership recognized that the next step was to develop research that supported the residents' desire for a full-service park in the heart of the community.

Phase II was exciting because we saw participation in the partnership grow amongst neighborhood residents as more than 25 residents spent over half a day at the visioning workshop and over 30 residents participated in the KABOOM! project. In this sense, we witnessed the



**Figure 3** Visioning Workshop with Reid Park Resident Facilitating Discussion.

neighborhood's confidence in its ability to affect positive change grow as their efforts began to translate to power. We credit this increase to the partnership's ability to find two projects that were highly meaningful to residents and provide support to increase engagement around those issues.

### **PHASE III DEVELOP A COLLECTIVE VISION: WHEN WE WORK TOGETHER**

To begin the third phase of action research, developing a vision, a Master's student focused his thesis project on identifying and quantifying disparities in municipal funding in the City of Charlotte. When describing what they wanted for Reid Park, residents frequently referred to a park in Dilworth, a nearby affluent neighborhood. The Dilworth park appealed to residents because it was located in the center of the neighborhood which enabled the surrounding households to visually look after the park.

Dilworth is quite different from Reid Park. It was established as a streetcar suburb in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and was home to a primarily White population. During the late 1900s the neighborhood experienced significant reinvestment as upper-class Whites began to return to the city. The thesis project compared the recreational spaces (including geographic and landscape characteristics), socioeconomic characteristics, public expenditures, and civic engagement of the two neighborhoods. The student interviewed city and county employees and residents. He also reviewed historical documents and park funding. His findings indicated that per person spending on park and recreation improvements since 1992 was significantly higher in Dilworth (\$279.70) versus Reid Park (\$55.90). In his conclusion, the author suggested that institutional racism influenced levels of funding for amenities in Charlotte's parks (Pryer, 2013).

This research was the catalyst for the formation of a coherent vision for the community. Not only did the project point to the inequality in funding between the two neighborhoods, but it also provided detailed descriptive analysis of how the difference in funding had impacted the quality of recreation facilities. The research helped confirm what Reid Park residents already knew—that there were disparities in recreation facilities between low-income and affluent neighborhoods. This further incited residents to take action towards a new park and added to the residents' growing sense of power and agency to affect change.

A second Master's student majoring in both Urban Design and Geography pursued a thesis project that built on the energy for a new park. Residents recognized that they needed to translate their vision to a schematic drawing to clearly communicate their vision to decision makers. The student met with the steering committee every two weeks over a two-month period for a total of

four design meetings as part of an intensive community planning process. He used multiple methods to engage the residents including a S.W.O.T. analysis, visual preference exercises, participatory mapping, and a mini-design workshop, or charrette. During this time, he also met with multiple city officials and policymakers. This work culminated with the production of a park vision plan.

Upon completion of the plan, the residents had something tangible that they could share with other stakeholders and policymakers. They had caught the attention of local officials and were able to use the park vision plan to clearly communicate their ideas. In follow-up interviews, they describe the vision plan as a source of power (Bengle, 2015). However, the neighborhood association still lacked the capacity to influence local decision makers who had the power to designate funding for a park.

### **PHASE IV DEVELOP POWER: LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD CONTROL**

The fourth phase of this six-year action research project began with Bengle's (2015) dissertation project aimed at building neighborhood power to affect local decision-making capacity. Although residents had produced a vision plan for the park, they lacked the power to secure implementation of that vision. They needed to harness the existing neighborhood interest in the park and push for funding from county decision makers. Of the students engaged in Reid Park, Bengle's participation with the neighborhood was sustained for the longest time, beginning at the inception of the partnership in 2009. Her action research dissertation explored empowerment planning (Reardon, 1996) and engaged the neighborhood in an empowerment planning process to organize for the implementation of the community-driven neighborhood park plan.

The dissertation dissected empowerment planning into three individual processes—popular education, participatory action research (PAR), and community organizing—and intentionally applied each process cumulatively with the introduction of three community-driven interventions to enable learning at each stage (Beard, 2003). In line with action research theory, the project aimed to learn by doing, and each intervention was designed to develop participants' capacity for planning. Each of the three interventions was specifically designed to target one of the three components—popular education; participatory action research (PAR); and community organizing—of empowerment planning. The end goal of this dissertation project—and of the empowerment planning process—was to realize the vision of a new neighborhood park.

Reid Park residents were engaged in developing the interventions, the first of which was a retreat to



Highlander Research and Education Center.<sup>2</sup> The goals of this trip were to develop a dialectical understanding of power within the community-university partnership; recognize the structural causes of oppression through the application of popular education; and develop an implementation plan for an oral history project, while learning popular education methods. The community-university partners used community mapping and a problem tree exercise to guide critical reflection.

For the second intervention, participants practiced popular education methods as they facilitated an oral history project for youth. On one level, the project was used to identify ways to preserve neighborhood history, increase relationships across differences, and foster neighborhood pride. On a second level, through engagement in the PAR project, the participants were also able to explore the power dynamics within their partnership with outside organizations engaged in the neighborhood-school partnership discussed earlier in this paper. Several other actions have since sprung from the oral history project which includes a participatory ceramic tile project and Legacy Festival. Our learning from the uneven power distribution evident in the neighborhood-school partnership was applied as we began preparing to mobilize the community.

In the final intervention, residents organized to influence the park planning process with MCPR. The popular education workshops at Highlander earlier in the project strengthened relationships and energized the leadership, while more deliberately engaging with them in an exploration of their experiences of structural inequality. The oral history project helped build their capacity to work together and, finally they were ready to move toward community organizing to exercise political persuasion over the process. Neighborhood leadership consistently contacted MCPR planners throughout the process and influenced the agenda of planning sessions hosted by MCPR. They organized to ensure that these meetings were well attended and coordinated a large resident turnout at a County Commission's budget meeting. The park was finally completed and opened in the fall of 2015. The final design was in many ways consistent with the vision laid out with the assistance of the Master's student in Phase III.

## DISCUSSION

As described by Reason and Bradbury (2001), action research involves processes aimed at bringing together action, reflection, democratic dialog, critical examination of existing theory and practical work on the ground. Ultimately, these various forms of knowledge are brought together and shared through collaborative partnerships with citizens whose concerns and visions are the drivers. We used action research to increase overall participation

in neighborhood-based community development projects (Silverman, et al., 2008). Institutionalized exclusion in the political process did not evolve overnight, it can be difficult to fight, and it requires persistence to overcome. Participation should be meaningful, inclusive, and connect to collective action for influence to develop (Murphy & Cunningham, 2003).

Action research can create the space for collaboration between community residents and university actors (Silverman et al., 2008), which we experienced within our community-university partnership, and it can lead to increased participation that connects local power in order to influence community development outcomes. As we mentioned in the beginning, this project evolved over six years. Similar to the experiences of Bodorkós and Pataki (2009), through our on-going work, our framework for this particular neighborhood planning process emerged as we gradually moved through various phases of engagement, discussion, and reflection. We often found that our own horizon for action was more distant than what community members anticipated. This is not surprising, especially considering how long Reid Park residents waited for a new park. Many times, we also felt that our inability to clearly map the community development process from start to end hindered the community's trust in us. The idea of learning by doing, which is at the heart of action research, posed its own issues, as residents doubted what we could offer in support of the community. These differing expectations of the process can be one of the troubling spots for community partners when engaging in research in community-university partnerships.

Starting with relationship building was key to our community development process. When we first began the partnership, we knew very little about the neighborhood, we were unaware of the park issue, unfamiliar with the history, and had only one contact in the neighborhood. The first phase was perhaps the most important; we went into the partnership with open ears and eyes and a willingness to learn. This attitude enabled us to identify the issues that were relevant to the community: the park, participation, and limited power. We developed relationships by executing small projects that seemed of little significance at the time, emphasizing assets by early on using an asset-based survey tool, and beginning to identify the most pressing issues. We understood that the process would be of little significance to community members if we were unable to identify an outcome, which in our case, was a new park. This was a relatively easy agenda to agree on and having that agenda created more participation in the community development process (Green & Haines, 2008).

Each phase of the project led us directly to the next phase as we reflected on what we learned and identified a new set of strategies. Using action research as our framework for a community development process

enabled us to clearly articulate phases of community development for future application. At the beginning, the university partners primarily drove the research. As we continued, however, the amount of community ownership gradually began to increase. We believe that this resulted from the values of shared partnership and commitment to long-term sustainability that we continued to demonstrate despite sometimes meeting challenges. By the end of the fourth phase, residents were identifying research questions, taking on leadership roles, facilitating projects, and acting as co-researchers in the process. Communities are empowered when their knowledge is valued and used in the generation of new knowledge when combined with scientific knowledge (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Our use of action research facilitated this valuing of knowledge and was important to the empowerment process.

The project that we have discussed is one that had direct, tangible community benefits. These benefits were evident throughout the project. These benefits first emerged as technical services such as map making, grant writing, and communication assistance, but they progressed to much more visible benefits such as a playground and new park. That is not to say that there were not also sacrifices for the community. We cannot ignore the immense amount of volunteer hours that community members committed to this project. One individual, for example, worked with us nearly the entire six-year period.

As illustrated in this paper, we use a framework for faculty, students and community partners to foster real community change through a focus on *process* (the production of knowledge through community empowerment); *product* (research questions developed and applied with the help of residents); and sustained *partnerships* that last beyond the semester and are rooted in specific places. This framework provides civically valuable educational, research, and collaborative opportunities that are made operational through action research.

In this sense, our action research helps establish a cyclical process that evolves through phases over time and in specific places. At the same time, our ethic of reciprocity demands that we emphasize community outcomes, as well. It is important that the knowledge produced seeks to address the unequal distribution of power and other resources. This means that power must be explicitly dealt with in our relationships with communities and benefits need to flow in both directions of the partnership (Maiter, et al., 2008).

## NOTES

- 1 KABOOM! is a national non-profit organization that builds playgrounds in low-income communities with the support of local businesses that supply volunteers. The organization requires a dollar-to-dollar cash match from the community for

the new playground. KABOOM! engages the communities in several participatory planning meetings and expects that several committees are formed to support the build day.

- 2 Highlander Research and Education Center, located in New Market, TN, has been at the forefront of community organizing in the South since the 1930s. Founded by Miles Horton, Highlander is based on Danish folk schools.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare

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