Cultivating "Kid Success" In Detroit Neighborhoods:

A Case Study of Literacy Programs at an Education-Focused Nonprofit Organization

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the families and staff of Neighborhood Strong who shared their

experiences with me, the families of my former students who taught me so much, and to my own

family whose steadfast love and belonging have allowed me to dream.

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Abstract

The question of how to support the early literacy development of children experiencing

marginalization through systematically under-resourced urban schools and neighborhoods has

been taken up in a variety of ways in educational research. The correlation between

socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and literacy is well documented, however, this research has

mostly been within the context of schools. This dissertation addresses the issue of family

engagement and literacy within an out-of-school, neighborhood context. Specifically, this is the

case of a Detroit nonprofit organization whose mission centers the success of young children,

their families, and their neighborhoods while operating as a social enterprise within a capitalistic

society. The neoliberal turn in education has put an emphasis on the individual, this organization

is making efforts to invest in the collective power of the often-ignored residential communities of

the city. I explore the culture, structures, and systems of the organization and how they are

utilized to engage families around literacy programming at distinct hubs in predominately

African American and Latinx neighborhoods in the city. This study explores the experiences of

various stakeholders who participate in the organization at different capacities. It highlights

community voices and explores how aspects of the organization affect engagement in literacy

programs within the neighborhood context. The analysis was guided by a conceptual framework which incorporates social theories of learning and literacy within an ecological framework that was developed to contextualize learning within a sociopolitical and racialized environment. Findings suggest that family-engaged and culturally relevant practices and a loving organizational culture create a welcoming environment for community members which allows for community members to connect with each other and with the resources offered by the organization. Additional findings from literacy program observations, however, indicate that literacy programs were not designed in response to the community within which they were being offered. The study revealed that even an organization committed to asset-framing, relationship-building, and a loving culture with equitable systems can fail to ensure that programs and stakeholders develop a critical consciousness that aligns with the collective focus of the mission.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Since 2015, many Detroit neighborhoods have engaged with a novel approach to supporting young children and their families by welcoming hyper-local community centers, or hubs, onto their streets. Focused on "kid success families and neighborhoods," Neighborhood Strong is a nonprofit organization that takes up residence in neighborhoods and transforms houses into kid-centric spaces offering services and programming geared toward education, family support, health, and neighbor-to-neighbor connection.

The staff who run the hub are hired from the neighborhood and are responsible for creating a warm, welcoming environment as well as informing and engaging families about the wide array of programming available right on their block. The hub offers programming through their connections with over 80 local and national partner organizations, including neighborhood block clubs, nonprofits, food banks, universities, and hospitals. The programming (and even the hours of operation) at each hub are designed with the goals and interests of that specific community. Each neighborhood has a distinct local history and culture, which the organization calls the "personality of the site." Most of the staff and participants at the neighborhood sites reflect the majority African American population of the city. In addition, two locations serve Spanish-speakers in neighborhoods mostly composed of first- and second-generation Mexican immigrant populations.

Located in a large, former convent building on the Southwest side of the vast city, the Neighborhood Strong headquarters houses the organization's "global team" who oversee the

implementation of this unique neighborhood model. This team covers operations, fundraising, development, partnerships, volunteer stewardship, and coordinates all of this with the neighborhood staff. The organization is currently halfway to their goal of servicing 24 Detroit neighborhoods by 2024. Though the programming in each neighborhood is unique, a consistent theme is the importance of early language and literacy development. Across the three program platforms (perinatal/infant/toddler, PreK/kindergarten, and elementary), programs are designed to serve caregivers and their babies and toddlers, preschool and elementary school-aged children, and adults. Even though many of the family literacy programs themselves are not unique, I seek to understand how these family literacy programs function within Neighborhood Strong's novel neighborhood-centric model as they seek to create "kid success families and neighborhoods."

On the Neighborhood Strong website, an image entitled "Our Current Locations" boasts a professionally designed map of the city of Detroit. The map is in perfectly coordinated shades of blue and orange, demonstrating the organization's attention to marketing materials which is also apparent on the website. (See Figure 1.) It shows thumbnail photographs of the current Neighborhood Strong hubs, or houses, spread across the city. Most of the images are from the street, and they show off the signature orange-painted front doors. Above each printed neighborhood name is a small blue cartoon-like outline of a roof with a chimney, emphasizing the home-like environment that is central to the brand. There are photos of seven brick homes of various sizes and from various eras, and one large brick building (a former convent) which serves as both a neighborhood hub as well as the headquarters and office space for the larger organization. In other places on the map there are blue text boxes announcing, "COMING SOON!" alongside the labels of four neighborhoods in the process of becoming part of the fast-growing network of what I will call community-based educational spaces (CBES) across the city

of Detroit. What began as Neighborhood Strong's plan to create "kid success families and neighborhoods" by serving children from "belly to eight" in one Detroit hub in 2016, has become a goal of extending out to 24 Detroit neighborhoods with plans to bring the model to other cities across the country. By the end of 2020, despite the challenges of delivering programming during the COVID-19 pandemic, Neighborhood Strong reached the halfway point with 12 neighborhood hubs

Figure 1.1

Map featuring current neighborhood hubs from the Neighborhood Strong website

When Neighborhood Strong is covered in the news, it is typically Ellen Collins (all names are pseudonyms), the CEO and co-founder who is representing the community. The

organization is a culmination of her years in nonprofit work in Detroit and a serendipitous partnership with the co-founders, a philanthropic couple seeking an experienced leader for their "legacy" project. When asked, "*In your own words, how would you describe 'kid success families and neighborhoods'?*", Ellen, answered,

> A kid success neighborhood is a neighborhood where everyone is coming together to assure that kids have what they need...Everybody is kind of gathered around and they are going to take extra care that that is going to happen. Some people call that 'what neighborhoods in Detroit used to look like' (Interview, 2020).

Ellen, like many of the staff of the community-based organization she oversees, was born in the city. In the past 60 odd years, the city has changed dramatically, including major demographic shifts and rapid population loss. Although there are many ways the city has changed, one of the most profound changes to Detroit neighborhoods is the steep decline of public schools from the peak of 370 schools in 1966 (Grover and van der Velde, 2015) to the 104 schools currently in operation in the 2020-2021 school year. The population of the city began its steady decline from 1950 when it had 1.8 million people to the recently estimated 670,000 in 2019 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The social zeitgeist surrounding the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s fueled the ongoing population shift of White families to the suburbs as decades of race- and religion-based housing discrimination against Black and Jewish residents, deindustrialization, unemployment, and racial inequality quickly changed the landscape of Metro Detroit.

In an example of all of these previously mentioned social realities, Detroit took the national stage in a 1974 Supreme Court case, *Milliken v. Bradley,* in which the court ruled against a proposal for an elaborate 53 district suburban-urban bussing plan to integrate the

schools of the newly-majority African American city and the growing majority-White suburbs surrounding it. As Detroit neighborhoods continued to lose White residents to the suburbs, many of the neighborhood schools became too expensive to operate and the district was forced to consolidate. In the decades since, this initial loss has been exacerbated by neoliberal reforms that emphasize a market approach to schools. It resulted in a volatile and confusing combination of various school choice options, including charter schools, and a privatized education system that challenged the longstanding notion of democratically run and community-serving school systems (Kang, 2020; Mirel, 1999, Wilson, 2015). The market-based education reforms across the United States emphasized the quantifiable achievement of the *individual* as a key measure of success (Lipman, 2011a) and, in doing so, amplified the existing and historical inequities of urban districts like Detroit that serve a largely African American community. Educational and family support nonprofits, like Neighborhood Strong and their partners, attempt to strategically fill the gaps in early childhood education, health education, and community building. These programs exist outside of the scope of the current public-school model, which already largely fails to include support for children or families before they enter preschool or kindergarten (Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland, & Yoshikawa, 2021).

Federal policies such as *No Child Left Behind (2001)* and *Race to the Top (2009)* incentivized individual achievement via standardized test scores; third grade reading results, in particular, have received special attention in state legislatures across the country. This is partly so because literacy is often considered *the* gatekeeper to academic achievement, upward mobility, job access, college readiness, and it is critical to the health of our economy (Feister, 2013; Hein, Smerdon, & Samboldt, 2013). Standardized assessments in third grade are a high stakes

academic checkpoint and therefore, there is an abundance of programs, both market-based and non-profit, that promote early elementary literacy achievement.

There is also a current proliferation of state legislation promoting retention for children who do not pass the state exam at the end of third grade which is projected to disproportionately affect subpopulations such as English Learners, economically disadvantaged children and children of color (DellaVecchia, 2020). A 2010 report from Annie E. Casey foundation, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* highlighted the research base for this third grade reading focus. Importantly, the report indicated that students with the lowest literacy scores were more likely to have high levels of household and neighborhood poverty. Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence that societal and community factors significantly impact literacy development and achievement, it's the de-contextualized individual third grade reading scores that continue to be a symbol of success. This literacy-without-context view puts the onus on individual children and families, diverting the attention from the inequitable societal systems— including schools— within which individuals and families operate.

The concentration of inequitable systems in cities like Detroit leads to a concentration of what might be perceived as individual failures in schools. Individual school administrators, individual teachers, individual parents, and individual children have been blamed for their failure to demonstrate a predetermined measure of "success", particularly in literacy, in this era of accountability. While some of this accountability is new, the scapegoating of marginalized families has long been a feature of US schools.

The focus on parent involvement, or engagement, can be traced back through almost two centuries of US legislation and policies that disproportionately affect students and families of nondominant backgrounds. Baqueando-Lopez, Alexander, and Hernandez (2013) say, "U.S.

policy has continuously regulated the parent-school relationship through normalizing perspective based on middle-class values backed by a century of developmental science focusing on family settings exemplifying those values" (p.150). In their review of the literature including the history of schools' perceptions of nondominant students and families, they identify key policies that have targeted students based on culture, language, and class. In this case, nondominant students are those who fall outside of the middle class, monolingual White cultural norms that schools and other societal institutions are built upon.

From as early as the Civilization Fund of 1819, which required public education for "opportunities" and "improvement" of Native American children through assimilation, forced attendance at boarding schools, and English-only education, to the implementation of Head Start and Title I programming for children from low-income families, lawmakers have clearly conveyed "that the home (and by extension the minority parent) was not effective to ensure the well-being of children" (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013 p. 151). This scrutiny of families and communities experiencing structural barriers including poverty and racism, perpetuates the US-centric myth of meritocracy and the deficit view of families, as I will discuss further in Chapter 2. Without an understanding of how communities have been historically and currently disenfranchised and disconnected from the educational, social, and economic opportunities, any exploration of current educational programs is incomplete.

Context of the Study

In an effort to explore family engagement and family literacy from an outside-of-school, strengths-based perspective, this dissertation study focuses on a nonprofit that aims to center the success (with an emphasis on success in literacy) of young children and families in the

development through the enactment of neighborhood-based community centers while also operating as a social enterprise within a capitalistic society.

Understanding who is leading, facilitating, connecting, and participating is an important part of this exploratory study. Most of the organization's neighborhood hubs serve a majority of African American families. One of the hubs serves a large Spanish-speaking, (mostly Mexican heritage) Latinx immigrant population that draws participants from within the neighborhood and, interestingly, from other parts of the metro area. The staff at the neighborhood hubs mostly reflect the racial and linguistic backgrounds of the participating families (African American and Latinx) and the global team has a more mixed group of White, African American, and Latinx staff. Notably, within the context of this majority African American city, the CEO and co-founders are White and reside outside of the city. The White identifying CEO has Indigenous heritage and is a first-generation high school graduate. The co-founders are Jewish American business owners whose continued philanthropic funding and fundraising help to support the nonprofit.

In contrast, before the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, and the resulting economic hardship, over 30% of families in Detroit were living at or below the poverty level (Detroit News, 2020). Researchers have long investigated the connections between literacy and poverty. Low socioeconomic status (SES) and early literacy skills are linked to other predictors such as early language development, grade level reading, school attendance, family engagement, high school graduation rate, and future earning potential (Hernandez, 2011).

Naturally, language and literacy development begins and continues outside of the school building. In an investigation into the children in low-income families and their literacy outcomes, Hernandez notes that the notion of "place" is important to understanding how literacy and

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poverty interact saying, "living in a high-poverty neighborhood exacerbates the effects of poor reading skills and family poverty" (p. 10, 2011). High poverty neighborhoods are defined by "concentrated economic hardship" and all the challenges that go with that: access to education, jobs, healthcare, transportation, and so on (Benzow & Fikri, 2020, p.8).

School-based literacy interventions, including high quality literacy instruction are critically important to limiting the effects of poverty on literacy, yet they are ineffective in changing the place-based challenges of high-poverty neighborhoods. Neighborhood Strong relies on community members to inform decisions based on their daily experiences—an unusual approach to educational and family services which often are developed and implemented *onto* economically, racially, and/or linguistically marginalized communities not "with, for, or by" them.

The goal of my dissertation is to understand how Neighborhood Strong approaches creating "kid success families and neighborhoods" as a multicultural organization with a diverse group of stakeholders. In addition, how do different stakeholders with differing identities and lived experiences understand the mission of "kid success families and neighborhoods" in relation to literacy and, specifically, how different neighborhood communities enact this mission. Finally, I describe the organization's cultural and structural traits that support staff, community member participants, partner organizations, volunteers, and other stakeholders in the Neighborhood Strong organization as they pursue the stated mission when it comes to literacy matters. I apply an equity-focused lens to these questions by bringing an awareness of how race, ethnicity, immigration status, linguistic diversity, socioeconomic status and other marginalized identities function in this community-based educational space.

Community-based Educational Spaces and Neighborhood Strong

Before March 2020, if we used the Neighborhood Strong map described earlier to make our way to one of the organization's eight neighborhood hubs, behind any of those orange doors, we would certainly happen upon various literacy programs for children and families. Since then, most of the programming is happening on phones and tablets across the metro Detroit area via Zoom links. Neighborhood Strong is a community-based educational space (offering educational programs out-of-school and/or after-school) that offers programming with these parameters: focus on children from "belly" (programs for expecting mothers) to age eight within four categories 1) education 2) health 3) family support 4) neighbor-to-neighbor connection. A variety of literacy programs are omnipresent across the hubs

The focus on out-of-school literacy with children and families has been featured in ethnographic family literacy research and in federally funded family literacy program development since the 1980s and 1990s (E. Auerbach, 1995; Barton, 1984; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Street, 1984). The purpose of these programs often reflects the school-based notions of individual achievement and, ultimately, a narrow view of students' success on standardized assessments. This creates an opportunity for CBES and non-profit organizations like Neighborhood Strong to operate differently, though, because they are not directly beholden to the pressures and bureaucracy of federal and state education policies. Baldridge (2020) describes the paradox of CBES within the United States saying, "CBES can be transformative, yet their paradoxical nature as potential spaces of liberation as well as sites of containment that reify deficit perspectives and racist discourses about minoritized youth is rarely considered" (p.619)

What happens when we take the focus away from the choices of individual children and families and instead take a broader view of families in context— within neighborhoods, within

cities, within the USA? I believe that searching in the community will lead to untapped assets that could be used to support children. The flexibility of community organizations to respond more effectively to the specific needs and realities of families that family literacy programs are designed for is under examined.

In a piece referring to the paradox of out-of-school youth development programs, Baldrige, Beck, Medina, and Reeves (2017) say CBES are "in a contradictory space where they are beholden to neoliberal logics of academic success by the state and also act as liberatory spaces for minoritized youth" (p. 382). Because CBES are located within the larger context of the United States, but, in Detroit where institutions and public services have been shaped by the "politics of disposability" (Wilson, 2015, p. 3; see also Giroux, 2006, Means, 2008) through which privatization forces devalue people—specifically people of color— institutions, services, and ideologies designed for the pursuit of the common good. Within this context, CBES are affected by the marketization and individualization of schools, but they also have the autonomy, agency, and ability to approach education with deep understanding, respect, collaboration, and community care if they choose.

Exploring a Mission-Driven Organization

Community-based educational spaces, such as the nonprofit Neighborhood Strong, use their mission statements to guide their work. Despite the environment of marketization that encourages achievement above all else, Neighborhood Strong is committed to a more holistic experience for the families that participate saying, "we provide the love, safety, and opportunities for growth" (Neighborhood Strong website, 2021). Behind the orange door of the large brick building that houses the Neighborhood Strong headquarters, is a small entryway, and down the hall is a door that is always open to families. The CEO, Ellen, is often sitting at her desk in front

of her laptop, having a phone conversation or working on her computer. She hollers warm greetings: "Hello!" and "Hi friend!" to passersby as she sits underneath the colorful panes of stained glass that reveal the holy origins of the space. Neighborhood Strong is Ellen's brainchild. The organization's mission establishes a focus on families with children 0-8 who have what they need to be school-ready, healthy, and stable" (Neighborhood Strong website, 2021). In the "What We Offer" section on the website, it says, "over 60% of children under five live in poverty" and "by third grade only 14% read at grade level". These facts illuminate the inter-related challenges of poverty and literacy achievement that were described in the Casey Foundation report reviewed above. In highlighting literacy as a major goal, Neighborhood Strong aligns itself with partners that offer family literacy programs for developing home language and literacy practices as well as one-on-one tutoring for school-aged children. As a major player in the 313Reads campaign, their organizational influence reaches into parts of the city that do not yet have a neighborhood hub. Literacy achievement is a clear goal of the organization, but it is not the only goal. Early childhood education has become a focus for many nonprofit organizations across the country and Ellen has experience from decades of nonprofit education work in Detroit.

Ellen originally intended to be hands-off after designing the organizational model. She stepped out of a leadership role but that changed within months of opening the first hub and she stepped back into the hands-on CEO role which she maintains today. The organization is shaped by the daily influence of Ellen's leadership style, the "flat" organizational model (vs. hierarchical), and a steadfast commitment to the mission of love, safety, and growth for all stakeholders. This type of purpose-driven leadership (Cardona, Rey, & Craig, 2019) is exemplified by the power of shared leadership, "influence is not in the hands of one or a few, but

in the hands of all who share the purpose and thus are eager to make it come to life in their work" (p. 58). As detailed in the following chapters, the notion of "flat organization" and shared leadership were challenged as the organization grew from five employees to over fifty employees over the first five years.

The mission that Ellen leads depends on "working alongside" neighborhoods in efforts to build a neighborhood network and support families with young children. The organization is committed to working "with, for, and by" the community to create "kid success neighborhoods and families" where communities have what they need to support young children as they enter school (Ellen interview, 2020). Inherent in this notion of "school ready" is early literacy and language development, which the organization recognizes is also connected to socioemotional development (evident in their program offerings).

The operations of the organization are reportedly focused on a grassroots approach. Ellen developed Neighborhood Strong in part by drawing on inspiration from the community-led organizing framework of the Los Angeles-based Magnolia Place which, "uses a network approach to leveraging resilience and community assets to combat the entrenched problems that children and families face" (Magnolia Community Initiative website, 2021) For instance, Neighborhood Strong does not enter neighborhoods until being invited by the community through established community organizations such as block clubs. The organization structures their growth and development from listening to and learning from families about what they want and need from this type of organization (see Figure 2).

Figure 1.2

Graphic describing how the organization chooses a location for a neighborhood hub

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS

1. **We evaluate and explore** a kid success ready neighborhood with community input and survey partner organizations active in the area.

2. **We invite community members** to neighborhood listening sessions to learn what the needs and interests are of the community.

3. **We accept the call!** After being invited into the neighborhood, we renovate a house to make it welcoming and friendly, including adding a community garden and play space.

4. **We organize with the community!** After renovation, the community helps us organize and invites neighbors to join in the movement.

5. **We conduct a goal setting meeting** with each family so they maintain control of their success and outline the path forward.

6. **We encourage families along their path!** Families begin programming and take advantage of services provided by partner organizations based on the goals they set.

7. **We provide on-site volunteering** and social opportunities to active participants and community members.

8. **We work with partner organizations** to collect data and facilitate a rigorous evaluation to learn the success and opportunities related to the effort.

For instance, during a virtual listening session for one neighborhood hub I observed in 2020, an outside consultant joined the managers from the hub to ask the community members opinions about how the organization was responding to the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the U.S. in winter 2020 and if there was anything else they could do. At the end of the session a community member said, "Thank you for taking the time out to survey participants. That's how you go into a community. That's what's up." (Observation Field Notes, Brightmoor Listening Session, 2020).

<div align="center">Overview of Relevant Literature and Theoretical Grounding</div>

Organizational culture and structures

Neighborhood Strong is an example of a social enterprise which Mair and Marti (2004) define as, "a process consisting of the innovative use and combination of resources to explore and exploit opportunities, that aims at catalyzing social change by catering to basic human needs in a sustainable manner" (p. 3). The organization was founded by philanthropists who hoped to improve early literacy outcomes in the city with a holistic, neighborhood-based approach.

Neighborhood Strong's organizational culture is grounded in relationships. The CEO and co-founder focuses on how people connect and relate as a driving force of the model. She is often heard saying, "systems can fail people, but people won't fail each other given the right conditions." Organizations who focus on ethos first use what is termed a "mission-aligned operating model" (Roe & Dalton, 2019) as a driving force for their organizational structure.

When the ethos of the organization is informed by relational goals such as love, growth, and safety, the leadership style must reflect this vision for the organization to be successful. The concept of "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1970) in organizational theory highlights the notion that leadership always happens in relationships and hinges on a culture of high trust, service, openness, and humility.

I find it important to further understand the structure and systems that undergird the short and long-term operations of Neighborhood Strong in order to understand how families are experiencing—and the neighborhood hubs are enacting— the mission of the organization.

Neighborhood Strong's structures and systems—including professional development— define how the mission of "kid success" is rolled out to each neighborhood. With the organization's commitment to "with, for, and by," and community-led organizing, the neighborhood community is positioned to have power to shape the hub. This interaction between the organization and its partners, the neighborhood hubs, and the families that participate in Neighborhood Strong services brings depth to the story of the organization. In particular, the family literacy programs offered in these hubs are often offered across the country through national partners. Examples of this include LENA (which stands for Language Environment Analysis, lena.org) Start, Raising a Reader, Reading is Fundamental, BookNook, and ABC Mouse.

LENA Start cohorts were first delivered at Neighborhood Strong hubs; the city in partnership with Black Family Development Inc. had the best graduation rates of all LENA Start cohorts implemented across the country in 2018, over 90% versus the national average of 80% completing the thirteen-week cohort (Levin, 2018). Even though this type of program is based on the popular, yet controversial, "word gap" research (Williams, 2020), it is a widely known and well-funded literacy program. The controversy refers to the outsized influence of this one study of just 48 families beginning in 1982 and the methodological underpinnings of the study, which some researchers say is loaded with deficit orientation to families experiencing poverty (Kamenetz, 2018). I further review this controversy in Chapter 4 when I overview literacy programming. In a big partnership deal, the City of Detroit selected Neighborhood Strong as their local partner to distribute the program.

In my own preliminary study, families referenced the authentic relationships they had during programs at Neighborhood Strong versus the other early education spaces where they brought their children. So, while studying how families are engaged in literacy programs is my focus, I strongly believe in the importance of understanding the context within which this engagement around literacy programs is happening.

The organization, pre-COVID-19, defined the space or environment where literacy programming was happening. During the 2020-2021 timeframe when I was collecting data, the space for programs was virtual, but families and staff were active at the physical hubs for weekly distribution days. Distribution included basics like food, supplies, diapers and it also included any materials needed for the weekly programs. Since the 1980s, family literacy programs, like ones offered by Neighborhood Strong, have been a way to connect families with schools. Such programs offer various features, like shared reading programs, parents as teachers, adult

education, ESL, book distribution programs, early language development with a focus on talking and vocabulary, and many others. Another variation in family literacy programs is how much the participating families influence the development, enactment, and direction of the programs; in other words, how much power and agency participating families have.

Additionally, a finding of a recently published meta-ethnography of over three decades of family literacy research notes, "An enduring silence related to racism, privilege, and injustice across highly cited studies is problematic because it informs scholarship that often serves its own purposes rather than families" (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2019, p. 285). Here, Compton-Lilly et al. are suggesting that this influential body of family literacy literature is missing critically important context and explicit discussion around the complexities of our society including the racialized contexts within which family literacy development and programs occur. Given the variety of cultural norms, languages, ethnicities, preferences, and desires in any community, the ability of community participants to influence program decisions is significant. With this in mind, I draw from a critical sociocultural perspective to highlight the need to look at family literacy contextualized through the lens of family engagement—particularly for African American and Latinx families, who are often the intended audience for programs.

Family engagement

Family engagement involves shared responsibility for caregivers and educational professionals, continuous and changing over time from childhood to adolescence, and reinforces learning across settings where children learn (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Head Start, 2018; Henderson et al., 2007, Ishimaru, 2014; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). This term has evolved over time from the often-critiqued, school-centric term "parent involvement." Ishimaru (2019) reviews the shift from parent involvement to family engagement in the federal policies of

the United States. Referring to the new "dual capacity framework" (Mapp & Kutner, 2013), she writes reviews:

> The framework contrasts with conventional parent involvement approaches in important ways, such as focusing on learning as a central aim, acknowledging the key role of educators in shaping opportunities for engagement, and attending to relational dynamics between educators and families. However, the framework does not center family engagement in the pursuit of systemic and institutional change for educational equity, or explicitly address the power, race, class, language, citizenship status, and other dynamics that infuse educational institutions and shape opportunities for nondominant families to "partner" with schools in educational reform (p. 354).

Ishimaru names the tension that with either term, parent involvement or family engagement, the current frameworks don't address the systemic and societal barriers for equitable educational experiences, obscuring/under-examining the realities that families face

The concept of culturally relevant family literacy and family engagement strategies will be a common thread through this dissertation. Although family engagement and family literacy are distinct bodies of research, they include substantial overlap. In this dissertation, I weave them together. This case study is relevant because it elicits perceptions and experiences of community members and how they perceive their own power related to family engagement, literacy, and "kid success".

In later chapters, I incorporate the context of family literacy programming to build upon previous family engagement research which has focused on finding "*un lugar*" (a place) for families in their child's education (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016). Because the data for this study was collected between September 2020 and September 2021, the notion of place has

evolved from a physical or geographical place to a notion of being connected, in this case—

virtually, to a community that will support your family. While doing so, I responded to the call

from Compton-Lilly, Rogers, and Lewis (2019) to move family literacy studies beyond the

historical silence around race, privilege, and injustice by "grounding the research in the lives and

voices of families and communities" (p 285). This study explores an organization that claims to

be committed to the voices of families and communities as they pursue neighborhood level

empowerment.

Research Methods and Study Design

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which key stakeholders

(community participants, staff, and leadership) enact the education-focused, "kid success"

mission of an urban nonprofit organization in Detroit, Michigan. Through this exploration, I

gained a better understanding of the organizational model used to support neighborhood-based

hubs throughout the city, particularly the ways in which the organization engages families

around family literacy programs. I hope to learn more from community participants and staff

about how each neighborhood's distinct features (demographics, history, languages used, etc.)

influence the way the site takes up the "kid success" mission of the nonprofit.

I bring my own epistemology as I critique the neoliberal features of educational

institutions in the United States that emphasize the individual over the collective. Particularly,

this is exemplified in the market model of education affecting Detroit families and school

communities, which has monetized schooling for public as well as for-profit charters and

defunded urban schools. This hyperfocus on individual achievement versus collective wellbeing

has played out in American education broadly, and particularly in the Detroit neighborhoods

where the focus has been on marginalized families to choose their best options in an unhealthy

schooling market, instead of substantial investment into the wellbeing of communities and neighborhoods to support institutions like schools. I believe that families, particularly families and children in urban centers, are systematically under-supported, under-resourced, and the knowledge and resources of these communities are under-valued and underutilized in educational and community programs. I see children as situated within families, neighborhoods, communities, and the larger society—not as stand-alone individuals. Their wellbeing is contingent upon the wellbeing of their greater context—their family, neighbors, school staff, and so on.

Decades-long disinvestment in Detroit neighborhoods, coupled with the privatization of education and proliferation of non-local players in the educational scene has changed the educational fabric of the city, with many families opting for charter and school of choice options outside of the city, shifting the collective community influence to each family making decisions for each individual child (Pedroni, 2011; Wilson, Bentley, & Kneff-Chang, 2019).

Many nonprofits have come to fill the void that a disintegrating public school system left. The apparent decision of this particular nonprofit, Neighborhood Strong, to invest—not just in their own programming— but in the fabric of the neighborhood itself and in community-building between neighbors should be illuminating to other educational researchers who study literacy and CBES programs.

As I detail in the next chapter, this research is important given the demonstrated need for engaging families around literacy programming inside and outside of schools as well as creating a collective, community-driven space for supporting families with young children. We can imagine how public institutions like day care centers, preschools, and schools could partner with education-focused nonprofits to support the goals. This study could help inform educators and

policy makers interested in how educational players (inside and outside of schools) can better partner with, engage, and support families as they pursue the joint goal of literacy development while also navigating the societal structures and systems that created this current need for equitable educational spaces. I illuminate the organizational and community contexts that make this type of educational partnership possible and promising by answering the following research questions:

1. What is "kid success" according to Neighborhood Strong stakeholders including community members, staff, and leadership? How does literacy fit into the stakeholders' sense of the mission?

2. How does each neighborhood hub enact the mission of the organization? How do literacy practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?

3. What organizational culture and structures support or limit the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of "kid success" and literacy?

To answer these questions I considered the observations, semi-structured interviews, and artifacts of my qualitative case study.

As I explored the organization, I observed "global" and "manager" staff meetings, did interviews with staff and leadership including the CEO and board members, and collected organization-level artifacts such as meeting notes, handbooks, and promotional materials. I conducted interviews with staff from neighborhood hubs, volunteers who run literacy programs, and partner organizations who work with the nonprofit to bring the programs to the neighborhood. Using the same methods, I observed literacy programs and collected program-specific artifacts. I also conducted interviews with community members from two neighborhood hubs: Southwest and Dexter-Linwood. By collecting data from a variety of sources, I sought to

better understand and explore this interesting model of engaging families through neighborhood-based community centers that emphasize listening and care in their distribution of early childhood services.

This qualitative case study draws on critical qualitative research in the fields of family literacy and family engagement to contribute to the body of literature focusing on documenting equitable and empowering educational spaces for communities of color, immigrants, and those most impacted by poverty. I explore how particular structures and systems of an organization influence how families who are traditionally marginalized in educational spaces might be positioned as knowledgeable and powerful stakeholders in their neighborhood community centers. While the neoliberal turn in education has put an emphasis on the individual, this nonprofit is attempting to invest in the power of the community all while operating within the constraints and ideological limitations of a capitalist society.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This chapter begins by contextualizing the educational landscape of Detroit, and how historic and contemporary shifts in demographics, politics, racialized policies, and economics have helped to create the current-day conditions of schooling in the city and how that affects literacy. Next, I review the literature for the separate, yet overlapping, bodies of family literacy and family engagement research. To narrow the focus within these two bodies of literature I review work that is most aligned with communities that are historically marginalized in urban schools, including African American families, Latinx families, children and families learning English, immigrants, and families that live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty. Next, I draw upon research from organizational literature including organizational culture and leadership styles to describe the features of the organization and how they support family-focused spaces.

This literature review aims to demonstrate the need for a context-specific exploration of neighborhood-based organization that serves African American and Latinx families across the city of Detroit. Finally, I describe the conceptual framework for this study, which incorporates social theories of learning and literacy within an ecological framework that was developed to contextualize learning within a sociopolitical and racialized environment. A key feature of this framework is allowance for the flow of power and agency between each of the levels of the ecological model.

Part I: Detroit's Education Ecosystem

In order to understand the context of contemporary urban schooling in the United States, it's important to understand how the educational landscape has been shaped by other sociopolitical factors such as systemic race-based housing segregation, deindustrialization, job loss, and school closure. As neighborhoods throughout Detroit changed over time, so too did the schools (Mirel, 1999; Kang, 2020). In the first half of the twentieth century Detroit's population grew by six-fold. The automobile industry boomed, and many were attracted to the promise of prosperity in this Northern city (Sugrue, 1996; Zunz, 1982). Well-paying automobile industry jobs brought waves of African Americans seeking work and refuge from oppressive Southern Jim Crow laws during the Great Migration (Tolnay, 2003; Wilkerson, 2011), White Appalachians who migrated north as the coal industry in their region declined, and newly arrived immigrants from around the world (Sugrue, 1996). This diverse mix of people descended on Detroit and other growing urban centers of the Northern United States. By the 1950 census, Detroit was the fifth largest in the country with 1.8 million residents. After that, the city began a population decline that has continued consistently each decade since. The most recent 2020 census indicates there are around 639,000 residents across the city of Detroit (Census.gov, 2021). In the following sections, I review the connection between the city's population growth and decline and the effects of neighborhood change on schools.

Housing, race, and public education

Before WWI, housing segregation was legally enforced through race-based covenants and redlining; segregation was informally enforced through violent, coordinated resistance and even mobs organized by White residents. These violent efforts to maintain segregation meant that Detroit's large African American population was relegated to a small portion of the city into neighborhoods that deteriorated under the jam-packed conditions (Sugrue, 1996).

After World War II, there was a housing boom outside of major U.S. cities. An estimated 1.2 million African American men served the country during World War II to fight oppression and discrimination around the world simultaneously experiencing ongoing discrimination within the military. After the war, they returned to the anti-Black discrimination of the United States. Most salient for the discussion of the educational ecosystem in Detroit is the fact that African American veterans were strategically left out of the benefits of the G.I. Bill of Rights. In various ways these returning soldiers were unable to access the home loans, education, and job training that was promised to them. The abundance of newly constructed suburban housing in metro Detroit was unavailable to the African American community. Racially and religiously restricted homeowner covenants allowed banks to withhold loans. When non-White citizens attempted to move into White neighborhoods or suburbs, violent White resistance to desegregation was permitted by law enforcement (Farley, 2018; Sugrue, 1996; Surkin &Georgakas, 1998).

By 1970, for the first time in history, the city's population had become majority African American. As these national and local demographic shifts in housing played out, so have the implications for public schooling and the community response to supplement and support children and families.

In his historical analysis of the Detroit school system from 1907-1981, Mirel (1993) describes why the city was an ideal educational case to study,

> Detroit has gone through virtually every significant economic and demographic change that Americans associate with large industrial cities...Few places in the country offer a better perspective on the interaction between industrial capitalism and the politics of race and class (p. xiii-xiv).

The politics of race and class that Mirel referenced played out in various ways throughout Detroit's history in violent and well-documented events such as the Race Riot of 1943 and the Uprising of 1967.

The former event, which occurred during WWII, was two days of White versus Black mob violence. The Detroit incident was one of five similar riots across the country that summer: including similar events in Harlem, NY, Beaumont, TX, and Mobile, AL. In Detroit, the riot was spurred on by racial tensions enhanced by aforementioned housing segregation and competition in manufacturing jobs in a city whose population had swelled with wartime workers from the South. White Detroiters continued to resist integration in White neighborhoods, in factories, and in recreational spaces. The riot began on Belle Isle Park, a popular space for Detroiters to gather during summer days and fanned the flames of division that left 34 people dead by the time federal troops were called in to stop the fighting. Of the 25 African Americans who died, 17 died from injuries from police. None of the nine White victims were killed by the all-White police department.

In the 1960s the city razed a major African American neighborhood and business district, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. In their place, the city built a freeway but failed to re-home or compensate the former residents or business owners for the loss of their land and livelihoods. On top of that, the suburban housing boom of post WWII Midwest, with its quietly insidious structural racism through red-lining and racial covenants kept Black families within the city, constrained by segregated neighborhoods and schools.

The 1967 Uprising (also called a Rebellion) began with a police raid on a speakeasy where there was a party for a Vietnam veteran who had returned home. This raid resulted in over 80 arrests of African Americans and the event incensed the local community. The city erupted in

violence, looting, and arson that lasted for five days until thousands of National Guard and U.S. Army troops were called into the city. This event, one of hundreds across the country in 1967, stemmed from the same unresolved issues of inequality that disproportionately affected the still-growing African American population in 1943: substandard and cramped housing options, employment discrimination, over-policing of African American neighborhoods by a predominately White police force, and continued resistance to integration of city spaces and neighborhoods (Darden & Thomas, 2013; Farley, 2013; Sugrue, 1996). The same issues of separate and unequal treatment were evident in the city schools which remained largely segregated by

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, a multiplicity of recently established suburban districts of metro-Detroit staunchly defended against attempts at school integration and the community resistance was later backed by the highest court (Riddle, 2000). One Northwest Detroit activist group, Northeast Mothers Alert (NEMA) was made up of White mothers who opposed bussing to desegregate schools. This conservative group expanded across the city and became known as Mothers Alert Detroit (MAD). The forceful opposition to attempts at desegregation was a continuation of the White backlash to the *Brown v. Board (1954)* and the *Civil Rights Act (1964).* A decisive Supreme Court ruling against bussing for integration--*Milliken v. Bradley (1974)* -- played out in 1970s metro Detroit. Due to the racialized housing policies of decades prior and in conjunction with the decline of industry jobs and the ease of transportation out of the city, the city and the surrounding suburbs represented a highly segregated educational system (Denton, 2014; Khalifa, Douglas & Chambers, 2016; Rothstein, 2017).

As with all public education, the schools in the city have always been tied to housing and employment which have, in the case of Detroit, consistently been shaped by racialized politics.

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As neighborhoods have evolved through these sociopolitical movements, schools have been shaped not just by shifts in demographics but also by the changes in school policy over time.

The Era of Accountability

Beyond the demographic and economic changes, there were the sociopolitical pressures that spurred an era of accountability in schools beginning with some national reports in the 1980s and becoming policies in the early 2000s. Even community based educational spaces such as libraries and after school programs were pressured to conform to achieving school -based standards. The *A Nation at Risk* report (1983) by the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned that U.S. schools were failing and in dire need of reform. In the report, the tone is directed at fellow citizens saying,

> The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life (p. 10).

Subsequently, education reform became an urgent matter. A report from reading researchers entitled *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985) followed and warned that standardized assessments had limitations in determining reading skills. This was the beginning of the era of accountability which gave birth to the far-reaching federal education policies enacted by the *No Child Left Behind* (2001) legislation. The law relied on each state testing students in Reading and Math starting in grade 3. Another new metric required teachers to be "highly qualified". The consistent testing data allowed for a metric "annual yearly progress", or AYP, to grade each school on its progress. The stakes were high because the repercussions of failing to demonstrate

AYP for subgroups of students (including categories by race, socioeconomic status, English Learner and Special Education labels) included sanctions such as allowing students to choose to attend another school, offer of free tutoring, and eventually a pathway to school takeover by the state and/or school closure. Despite the equity-focused intention of the law, the high stakes of accountability created even more instability in urban school systems like in Detroit.

In a study that builds on the previous case study from Mirel (1993), Kang (2020) described the educational system in Detroit from 1980 to 2016. Kang focuses on the shift in control from a school board governance model where local stakeholders such as elected community members, teachers, administrators, and parents made decisions to a market-based governance model which moved decision-making into the hands of often non-local actors such as "philanthropists, foundations, venture capitalists, non-profit organizations, and politicians" (p. 171).

In Detroit, when the public schools lost their local influence through an accountability mechanism of state-takeover and emergency management, the district was forced to close more schools, lost more students to suburbs and charters, and the budget surplus was obliterated. A 2019 report commissioned by the once-again democratically elected 2017 school board, "Review of Detroit Public Schools During State Management 1999-2016", detailed how the emergency management of the district was short-sighted and costly and led to major debt (Levin, 2019). While attempting to handle the finances associated with aging school buildings and salaries for staff while the district was shrinking, there was no focus on learning. An online article reported,

> As they sought to stanch the financial bleeding, emergency managers paid little attention
> to what was going on in the classroom, according to the report. A 2018 curriculum audit
> found that students had been learning from outdated materials that Superintendent

Nikolai Vitti called 'an injustice to the children of Detroit' (Einhorn, 2018 as cited in

Levin, 2019).

This audit linked the era of the non-local financial managers to the failing test scores of the

majority of Detroit school children. The curriculum was not preparing students for the very

assessments that had the power to determine if their schools would remain open.

According to a report entitled *A School District in Crisis*, Detroit Public Schools closed

195 schools between 2000 and 2015, while 38 public charter schools opened during the same

time period (Grover & van der Velde, 2016). School closures had significant effects on how

children and families experienced schooling in the city. The nonprofit The Urban Institute

released a report entitled *Motor City Miles*, describing how far Detroit children are traveling to

attend school and how the market-based model of choice is functioning (Cowen, Edwards,

Sattin-Bajaj, Cosby, 2018). The authors report, "almost half of the students who remain in the

city for school attend a charter school, and one out of every five students leaves the city every

day to attend school" (p.28) and despite the choices that families have, "access to school,

especially schools of varying degrees of quality, is still more limited for students of color, low-

income students, and, in some cases, students with particular academic needs" (p. 30). As with

large scale school closures in other urban centers, the loss of the physical space of the school and

the history and relationships that are housed there translate to a significant sense of loss within

the community (Ewing, 2018). The educational system in Detroit, once a centerpiece of

neighborhood communities, had disintegrated under decades of inequitable investment across the

city, struggles for local control, financial crises, population decline, and a market-based reform.

Some researchers view the education reform of the city (and others) as part of a larger neoliberal

movement of displacing the existing majority-Black community in neighborhoods while

investing in the downtown area (Lipman, 2011; Means, 2019; Pedroni, 2011). In a discussion of urban shrinkage Pedroni (2011) explains,

> Educational reform in Detroit has not operated in isolation from other reform trajectories related to economic development, land use policy, public infrastructural investment, and governance. As mentioned previously, both the quartet of regional foundations [referring to the Kresge Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, the Skillman Foundation, and the McGregor Foundation] and nonprofit-sector organizations like New Detroit have also spearheaded policy initiatives in non-educational urban sectors. What unites the various reform efforts is a common commitment to neoliberal ways of understanding how sectoral reform and economic development within the city is to be accomplished. (p. 209)

The traditional system for educating children disintegrated and evolved; in response, other community spaces have stayed relevant and new educational spaces have emerged.

Community-based Educational Spaces

Community-based educational efforts have been a consistent supplement to urban education across the nation. Community-based education spaces are spaces of learning, belonging, care, and trust, especially for students from communities of color and immigrant communities (Baldrige, 2014; Ginwright, 2007; Heath & McLaughlin, 1994; Lee & Hawkins, 2008). As the geography of Detroit schools has shifted across decades, it remains constant that schools are just one place where learning occurs.

Community-based educational spaces, which often include distribution of food, health care, and other holistic services are parallel entities to schools. For example, in the wake of the Uprising of 1967, which was ignited by the smoldering race relations between Black Detroiters and White police officers, a local priest and civil rights organizer co-founded a community-

focused organization in Northwest Detroit. Today, Focus: HOPE remains a fixture of the community (https://www.focushope.edu/). The place-based organization takes a holistic approach to supporting the surrounding neighborhood community which includes job training, early education and family support such as doula services, youth development programs, and food for senior citizens.

In 1992, Detroit civil rights activists Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs built on the national Afrocentric Freedom School models and began a multicultural and intergenerational summer program called "Detroit Summer" which used a problem-based pedagogy and engaged youth in the issues and concerns of their immediate neighborhoods. This community educational program was the seed of the idea that became The James and Grace Lee Boggs School, which opened in 2013, and was designed as a place-based, service model of education. The planning and development of the school began in 2009. At this point the public district had already been subject to ten years of state-appointed management, a rash of school closures, when the state declared a financial emergency and assigned an emergency manager to the district, all of which are tools for restructuring in the neoliberal era of education (Levin, 2019; Lipman, 2013; Wilson, 2015).

The Boggs School is committed to the local community and exemplifies the civil rights-focused reform that Detroit activists have been building on for decades in response to the market-based, outcome-oriented approach (Van Houten, 2016). In an essay entitled *Education: The Great Obsession*, Grace Lee Boggs described the model of community education that implored schools "must be functionally reorganized to become centers of the community" (1970). Boggs argued it was urgent to "develop a new system of education that will have as its means and its end the development of the great masses of people to *govern over themselves and*

to administer over things" (Boggs, 1970; printed in Monthly Review, 2011). While the restructuring and reshaping of schools was happening, so too was movement and discussion within philanthropic circles. It was through their philanthropic endeavors that the Neighborhood Strong[1] co-founders, Bruce and Beverly Jacobson[2], determined they would like to leave their legacy with an investment into early childhood education. They came to Ellen Cumberidge, a leader at a regional nonprofit, for advice and guidance. The trio soon found themselves imagining a new neighborhood-centric experience for the children of Detroit. The group drew inspiration from an early childhood model that Ellen saw in California which used tools of community organizing to engage with families while stating a focus on "kindergarten readiness" and "grade level literacy", school-based notions of success. The Jacobsons hired Ellen and funded the first year of the project to make this vision into reality.

Neoliberal Policies and Literacy

Neighborhood Strong co-founders began connecting and planning in 2015 with a focus on linking existing and new partners to support early literacy for children across the city. During this development process, a key statistic that organization relied on was the number of students in the city who are proficient on the third-grade state reading test, a number that has improved since 2015 to 11.9% of third graders but remained low compared to the state average of 45.1% proficient (Chambers, 2019). While this improvement is considered a step in the right direction, it is too little and too late for many students and educational advocates across the city. In 2016, some of those students brought the system's failure to court which turned into a four-year battle with the right to a literacy education at center stage.

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[1] Neighborhood Strong is a pseudonym
[2] All participant names are pseudonyms

In April 2020, fifty years after Grace Lee Boggs' essay referencing education as a tool for self-governance was published, a group of former Detroit public school students won a historic lawsuit against the state of Michigan as a federal appeals court ruled that citizens have a constitutional right to literacy, citing the importance of the ability to read and write as "essential" to participation in American democracy (Kim, 2020; Reed, 2021; Turner, 2020). The lawsuit, Gary B. vs. Whitmer (previously Snyder, both governors), sued the state of Michigan because it had overseen a school system that failed to provide safe and clean facilities, appropriate and up-to-date materials, and qualified and substantive teaching staff (*Gary B. v. Whitmer*, 957 F.3d 616 (6th Cir. 2020)). The right to literacy, as determined in a 2-1 judgment by the appeals court, was directly related to citizenship and participation in democracy. The judge explained,

> And education—at least in the minimum form discussed here—is essential to nearly
> every interaction between a citizen and her government. Education has long been viewed
> as a great equalizer, giving all children a chance to meet or outperform society's
> expectations, even when faced with substantial disparities in wealth and with past and
> ongoing racial inequality. (*Gary B. v. Whitmer, 2020*, p. 60)

The schools attended by the plaintiffs, five public and charter buildings from elementary to high schools, failed to educate the community they were serving. Quoted in the same appeals document the case said, "(L)iteracy instruction provided in Plaintiff's schools is so wholly insufficient that ninety percent or more of the students are unable to meet state proficiency standards" (p.11). The literacy focus of the case underlined the importance of literacy across content areas and grade levels.

Noted in the court documents is the constantly looming threat of school closure from the state, which if implemented, would disrupt the normal functioning of schools and lead to

uncertainty for students and staff. School closure is a function of the state based on federal accountability measures according to *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) and its predecessor *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001). In Michigan, the state uses an index of various measures including student growth, student proficiency on standardized assessments for varying subjects across grades 3-12, graduation rates, and English Learner progress to rate a school from 0-100. The lowest performing 5% of schools in the state are automatically identified as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools and monitored for three years. Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) accounted for nearly half of the schools on the 2016-2017 list of CSI schools with 56 DPSCD schools represented. Student proficiency is determined by grade level testing which includes English Language Arts and Math at each level. Literacy proficiency, as determined by this model of individual achievement on test scores, has profound implications for the future of entire school communities. As mentioned previously in this chapter, test scores are a portion of accountability measures that determine if schools will be under threat of takeover or closure.

In October 2016, just two weeks after plaintiffs in the above-mentioned *Right to Literacy* case filed their class action lawsuit against Governor Rick Snyder, the Michigan legislature passed a mandatory retention law for the state's third graders based on their performance on the annual assessment. Also included in the law were research-supported recommendations for creating a proactive system to identify students in need of support, create consistent lines of communication with families about their child's literacy development, and support instruction with early literacy coaches in each building and ongoing literacy professional development (Michigan House Bill #4822).

Educational advocates applauded the recommendations but point out that these efforts have been underfunded by the state (Levin, 2020), a predicament that will disproportionately affect those already financially troubled districts like Detroit. Despite research indicating significant risks to retention including negatively affecting student motivation and achievement and higher high school dropout rates (Holmes 2006; Jimmerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Martin, 2011) and with very little evidence of positive lasting effects (Huddleston, 2014), the legislators joined states around the country in passing third grade reading legislation that had the potential to disproportionately affect students in already struggling districts like Detroit (DellaVecchia, 2020).

In a literature review, Huddleston (2014) determined that some studies indicate retention may achieve some of the desired effects such as alignment between curriculum and instruction as well as short term improvements in grade level achievement. He also found that there were unintended consequences such as encouraging teachers to teach to the test as well as retaining the most vulnerable students and those most impacted by the structural inequality in the U.S. (p. 22-21).

So, despite pushback from the literacy research community and educational leaders in schools on the retention mandate (French, 2020; Sprouse, 2017), the Read by Grade Three law was primed to go into effect for the 2019-2020 school year that was interrupted in March 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic. Michigan received a federal waiver for state testing in 2020 as Detroit became an early hotspot for community spread, illness, and death from COVID-19. In February 2021, the Biden administration announced that all states would be required to give assessments during the most disrupted and unconventional school year of the modern era of schooling where some children had yet to set foot into a classroom since the last school year

(Barnum, 2021). In Michigan, the Read by Grade Three law was in effect as children, families, and teachers navigated the historic school year. According to an October 2021 study from Michigan State University, only 229 students were retained. This was a small percentage of the 3,661 students whose families were sent retention notification letters. One finding of the study is that "Black and poor students were more likely to be retained than their White and higher income peers" (EPIC, 2021, p. 19).

In courtrooms and state houses across the country, the right to literacy cases (a similar case was settled against the state of California in February 2021) and what has been characterized as "read-or-flunk laws" (French, 2013; Smith, 2012) highlight the critical importance of early literacy development in U.S. schools. These two approaches are advocating for the same research-informed investments in professional development, research-based instructional practices, and early interventions. A key difference between these two legal routes to improve literacy instruction in schools appears is the framing of the context in which schooling occurs. The *Gary B. vs Whitmer* brief begins with a strong argument for a systemic view of literacy education in schools:

> Decades of State disinvestment in and deliberate indifference to Detroit schools have denied Plaintiff schoolchildren access to the most basic building block of education: literacy. Literacy is fundamental to participation in public and private life and is the core component in the American tradition of education. But by its actions and inactions, the State of Michigan's systemic, persistent, and deliberate failure to deliver instruction and tools essential for access to literacy in Plaintiffs' schools, which serve almost exclusively low-income children of color, deprives students of even a fighting chance (p. 1).

The current superintendent of Detroit Public Schools Community District Nikoli Vitti expressed

his aversion to using the state standardized test as a decision-maker: "The third grade read[ing]

law places too much emphasis on the state reading test. This is punitive and contradicts what we

know as best practice and what we know is best for children. We should never use a standardized

test to punish students" (French, 2020). In the same article, Beth DeShone, the executive

director for the Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP)—a "bi-partisan, non-profit advocacy

organization" known for its pro-neoliberal agenda—expressed dissatisfaction in response to

superintendents who pledged to override the retention piece of the legislation saying, "I find it

shameful that these adults would look to find ways to circumvent the law...Students who are

struggling readers in third grade typically continue to struggle in school and have higher dropout

rates...If they ignore the law, I'd say they're breaking the law"(French, 2020).

According to the GLEP website, DeShone is a former legislative staffer and campaign

consultant for notable Michigan Republicans including the failed Dick DeVos for Governor

campaign in 2006. His wife, former U.S. Education Secretary and school choice champion Betsy

Devos, has faced fierce resistance from educational activists in Detroit in response to the

unregulated market-based education reforms that have affected families and schools across the

city (Hetrick, Wilson, Reece, & Hanna, 2020). GLEP, where the West Michigan native DeVos

began her trajectory in politics, advocates for testing accountability as well as school closure. A

2017 press release on their website is titled "GLEP CALLS FOR CLOSURE OF 38

CHRONICALLY-FAILING SCHOOLS", these schools represented the lowest performing 5%

of schools in the state. Twenty-five of the schools were in Detroit, a fact that remained

uninterrogated in the press release (GLEP, 2017). In 2017, in an attempt to rehabilitate low-

performing schools, the state created "partnership" schools that work with the Michigan

Department of Education to develop district-directed plans instead of the formerly relied-upon heavy-handed closures (Donahue, 2019).

Of the various perspectives represented above, the voices of the community members, school leaders, and the legal representatives of school children in Detroit could add necessary nuance to our understanding of literacy education within Detroit schools. Literacy learning is not just restricted to the walls of a classroom. Community organizations are part of the educational scene as well. What does it mean, in this context of the city of Detroit and the political debate about its educational state, to learn about literacy from community-based stakeholders?

The shift from schools to community spaces as sites of literacy instruction expands the view from that of individual students to family and community as part of the instruction. In this review of the literature, I will look at a particular slice of literacy research — family literacy and how it intersects with the scholarship on family engagement.

Part II: Review of Related Literature: Family Literacy and Family Engagement

Early literacy development and family engagement are acknowledged as key indicators of academic success for children regardless of demographic factors (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Jeynes, 2003; NELP, 2008; Sheldon, 2003). Important sites for literacy development, beyond the child's home, include spaces where children are interacting in social situations such as community centers, preschools, and elementary schools.

Since the 1980s, family literacy programs have been bridging the literacy skills of home and school through various programs that include: shared reading programs, parents as tutors, adult education, ESL, book distribution programs, early language development with a focus on talking, and many others. An important feature of family literacy programs that I will focus on is

how much the development, enactment, and direction of the program is influenced by the community that is being served; this includes but is not limited to consideration for the cultural norms, languages, ethnicities, preferences, and desires of families who participate. The field of family engagement gives us insight into the strategies for including families in educational spaces like family literacy programs.

Family engagement is a term to describe the interaction between educational institutions and the caregivers (not restricted to the parents but inclusive of grandparents, guardians, siblings, etc.) of the children they serve. Ideally, family engagement is defined by mutual respect and two-way communication between families and representatives of educational institutions such as schools and community centers (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Head Start, 2018; Henderson et al., 2007, Henderson & Kutner, 2013; Ishimaru, 2014; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). This term has evolved over time from the often-critiqued, school-centric term "parent involvement". Parent involvement provides a limited view of the ways caregivers' support is recognized by using school-centric activities such as volunteering or attending parent-teacher conferences as the sole criteria of supporting their child's education (Auerbach, 2011; Epstein, 2001).

Family engagement connotes a holistic view of who (caregivers of all varieties) is supporting children and how they are giving their child that support inside and outside of school (Henderson et al., 2007; Ishimaru, Torres, Salvador, Lott, Williams, & Tran, 2016; Wilson, 2018). Additionally, Wilson (2018) expands on the terms involvement and engagement to include the notion of school-home *partnerships* saying, "Educational involvement, engagement, and partnership activities constitute socially constructed roles that are culturally relevant given family members' racial/ethnic/cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and beliefs" (p. 56).

To consider the interaction between family, community, and educational institutions through a critical perspective, I deliberately draw upon a body of work that names and critiques the role of power, oppression, and resistance that is present across interacting systems such as families, communities, organizational agencies, and state and federal government.

In particular, this work focuses on a larger negative narrative that permeates society about families and communities of color, low socioeconomic status, or English learners who may be targeted for engagement and literacy programs. This negative narrative or, "deficit thinking" based on race- and class-based bias (Valencia, 1997), of students (especially non-white, low-income, and/or non-English speaking students) allows for educators, policy makers, and other community outsiders to blame communities experiencing educational and economic failures instead of naming the structural or systemic factors that are barriers to attaining educational success, such as discriminatory housing policies, systemic racism in the justice system, and concentrated poverty.

Deficit view of families

In the United States, we live and operate within a bias-filled system of beliefs, chief of which is meritocracy, the idea that if you aren't succeeding you aren't trying hard enough (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). In our meritocratic society we are quick to attribute *deficit* to any kind of *difference,* particularly difference from the institutional and societal norms that have been built from a White, middle-class perspective. This system of beliefs is undergirded, critical race scholars say, by White supremacy which is "used to refer to the normative practices, beliefs, and assumptions as well as the systemic and structural forces that situate Whiteness at the center of what is considered "normal," privileging the perspectives and interests of White people as superior to other groups," (Gillborn, 2015 as cited in Jacobs, 2017, p. 119). As we all are

products of this cultural norm, people working in educational institutions such as community organizations and schools are susceptible to deficit thinking about children and families they are serving.

Deficit views of communities of color, non- (or non-standard) English speakers, and economically disadvantaged communities are perpetuated both interpersonally (e.g., teachers have low expectations) and systemically (e.g., chronic underfunding of districts). Because of the insidiousness of deficit narratives, taking the opposite view—an asset view of historically marginalized communities—requires vigilance, reflection, and resistance from an individual to a systems level (Cooper, 2007 & 2009; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; De Gaetano, 2007; Khasnabis, Goldin, Perouse-Harvey, & Hanna, 2019; Pollack, 2012).

In a critical reflection of the function and abundance of deficit narratives in teacher talk in schools and how it deflects responsibility from institutions, Pollack (2012) says, "This type of deficit narrative blames the parents (especially the mother) and supposed cultural deficiencies for the child's learning problems; and, perhaps more importantly, it makes it clear who is not to blame" (p. 96). In a later section, I will note the research specific to deficit-oriented family literacy programs and notions of family involvement/engagement that illuminate this quote.

Through the following literature review, I aim to critique the aforementioned deficit narratives with research that names the systems of power and oppression which are present in educational settings where family literacy programs occur. Using this critical lens, the research also highlights the assets of communities and the power they (and the educational institutions) possess to resist oppressive forces. One of my objectives is to bring the often-invisible deficit narratives that are present in family literacy programs and family engagement activities to the surface while considering the implications of a power-sharing, asset-orientation to both. The case

study I have conducted will prove relevant because it investigates the family literacy programs offered at one neighborhood-based nonprofit and elicits perceptions and experiences of community members and staff who traditionally hold differing levels of participation and power.

Family Literacy: A History of Dichotomies

The International Literacy Association defines literacy as "The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context" (International Literacy Association, 2020) *Family literacy*, defined by the International Literacy Association (ILA) is, "The home literacy activities of families" and the association adds that "(t)he term is also used to refer to literacy education programs that focus on developing the literacy skills of parents and children simultaneously" (2019). An important addition to this definition is from Morrow (1995), "Family literacy activities may also reflect the ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage of the families involved" (p. 8). These broad definitions indicate the various interpretations of what family literacy is. In this study, I focus on the latter part of the ILA definition above, looking at literacy education programs developed for parents and children. One of the longest running producers of family literacy programs is the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL; formerly known as National Center for Family Literacy). NCFL markets these types of programs as key to social and economic mobility, starting their mission statement with, "NCFL works to eradicate poverty through education solutions for families" (National Center for Families Learning, 2019). This large national nonprofit has big-name sponsors such as Toyota, the Dollar General, PNC Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, and the US Department of Education.

Family literacy programs became popular and were brought to scale nationally in the 1980s. Many of the first iterations of the programs have been critiqued for focusing on teaching

literacy skills in color and culture blind ways, reinforcing school-like literacies that reflect middle-class, White families. Critics of early family literacy models focused on low-income communities noted that the programs did not acknowledge or incorporate the cultural and linguistic knowledge that is intricately threaded through individual and group culture, (Auerbach, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 2000; Rodriguez-Brown, 2010; Street, 1984; Taylor, 1997). Community members, educators, and researchers have spoken out against the deficit orientation of family literacy programs serving in poverty, families of color, and families of immigrants and/or English Learners and influenced the generation of alternative, community-responsive programs (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2012).

The lack of awareness of the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic strengths of participating families may lead to a deficit orientation to family literacy. Rodriguez-Brown (2010) says this is "based on the premise that low SES and minority parents do not provide young children with preschool literacy experiences that prepare them for future school success"(p. 742). Deficit-driven models of family literacy do not consider the variety of culturally relevant ways parents are preparing and engaging in literacy with their children before they enter school. Rodriguez-Brown explains a sociocultural perspective on family literacy allows a researcher to value how families share literacy in their homes and communities "rather than report on what the children do not know in relation to the expectations of school systems, which are based on White, middle-class values and experiences" (p. 734). The field of literacy researchers is implicated in the reproduction of deficit narratives, as Willis (2015) says, "It is a practice in academia to dismiss or minimize structural economic status inequalities as well as differential access to resources, while promoting the need for reform among subgroups of children; thereby, creating talking points about false equivalencies (p.33)"

In a 2010 review of family literacy research, Rodriguez-Brown categorizes family literacy programs into two types: 1) What E. Auerbach (1995) called "deficit" programs that appear to train parents to incorporate particular parenting and literacy practices in their homes. She specifically pointed to the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) model that directly influenced family literacy programs which were implemented at a national level such as Even Start. 2) "Enrichment programs" (Rodriguez-Brown, 2010, p. 742) that view mutual respect of and collaboration with families in order to empower people to view literacy as a change agent against oppressive forces. Describing the latter, Rodriguez-Brown (2010) explains, "Enrichment programs allow parents to share literacy with their children in the language they know better and to continue to share literacy activities that are culturally specific even though they do not resemble school activities" (p. 743), as well as introducing families to new activities that can support school-like literacy learning in a culturally and linguistically responsive way.

Some examples of out-of-school enrichment programs that were developed from a sociocultural theory view of literacy and locally designed to be culturally and linguistically responsive include the Project: FLAME which was developed with Latinx families in Chicago, Illinois (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009), Literacy for Life (LFL) program which is affiliated with the University of British Columbia and works with low-income Sudanese refugee and Chinese immigrant families (Purcell-Gates, Lenters, McTavish & Anderson, 2014),Parents as Literacy Supporters (PALS), and PALS in Immigrant Communities programs which served Vietnamese immigrant families in the Greater Vancouver area in British Columbia, Canada (Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2011). There is also a strengths-based family program for Latino kindergarteners that supports vocabulary development (Leyva, Shapiro, Yeomans-Maldonado, Weiland, & Leech,

2022). These programs are designed from a local perspective and with the perspective

that literacy and language development are socially constructed. It is important to note

that the programs mentioned are small-scale, locally funded programs.

In a meta-analysis of family-based emergent literacy interventions, Manz,

Hughes, Barnabas, Bracaliello, and Ginsburg-Block (2010) lament, "one size does not fit

all" (p. 424), noting that even in activities that are common in family literacy programs

(e.g. storybook reading), the caregivers' beliefs and cultural norms will influence the

interaction with the book and the child. Manz et al. (2010) go on to explain the need for

culturally valid assessment saying, "Research…clearly demonstrates cultural trends in

caregivers' beliefs and routines around language and literacy interactions with their

children. Therefore, researchers must operate from methodologies that allow for

understanding, appreciation, and incorporation of stakeholders' values in emergent

literacy intervention development" (p. 424). Examples of family literacy programs that

not only include important participant demographics in their work, but also design and

redesign programs around the values of the participants are described in the section

below.

Literacy is not neutral. To better understand how literacy has historically been

conceptualized in family literacy programs and as a function of education in power-laden

societies, Brian Street's (1985) autonomous and ideological models of literacy bring a critical

analysis to the idea of literacy as a morally neutral phenomenon,

> The standard view in many fields, from schooling to development programs, works from
>
> the assumption that literacy in itself--autonomously--will have effects on other social and
>
> cognitive practices. Introducing literacy to poor, "illiterate" people, villages, urban youth

etc. will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic

prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions

that accounted for their "illiteracy" in the first place. (Street, 2003, p. 77)

The pursuit of school-based, Western notions of literacy such as reading and writing text become

goals of the society but also tools of division and oppression. Horner (2013) explained in his own

words Street's autonomous model and how its seemingly neutral phenomenon can be

weaponized against groups in this way,

> …the autonomous model is powerful in claiming an autonomy for literacy that hides its
>
> ideological character, purporting to offer literacy as an ideologically neutral
>
> phenomenon—a gift to the unfortunate, who can thence be blamed for failing to make
>
> appropriate, grateful use of it to improve themselves (p.2).

Within U.S. society, literacy is one of the many racialized and stratified concepts that is

inherently political because of how it functions as a divider between groups of people.

> Larson (1996) writes about Street's (1995) scholarship to guide teachers as "the current
>
> conservative political agenda promoting 'back-to-basics' is putting pressure on schools to
>
> improve standardized scores, specifically using African American and Latino students as a target
>
> audience". In a rejection of the false sense of urgency that the conservative media has been
>
> spreading, she continues with a discussion of literacy and power,

> Street argues that universalistic conceptions of literacy put forward in autonomous
>
> models do not 'lift those who learn it out of their socially embedded context' (p. 79), but
>
> rather can suppress students under the ideology and social control of their teacher's
>
> class…thus, if literacy is represented as a context-neutral skill, then it fulfills the political

purposes of those in power to maintain a position of superiority by marginalizing other

forms of literate knowledge. (Street, 1995 as cited in Larson, 1996 p.440)

Street conceptualizes the opposite of the autonomous model as an "ideological model" of

literacy. The ideological model contextualizes literacy as existing within cultural spaces. This

model includes knowledge, identity, and a sense of being that is not recognized in the

autonomous model.

Street (1994), whose work also included examining literacy in international spaces

explains, "The autonomous approach is simply imposing western conceptions of literacy on to

other cultures or within a country those of one class or cultural group onto others" (p. 77). Street

was part of the sociocultural turn in literacy research in the 1980s and 1990s (Barton &

Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Street, 1984) other literacy researchers also

began to view literacy within context- understanding that literacy instruction both in and out of

school should be adapted, as needed, to be responsive to culturally and linguistically diverse

learners(Gutierrez, 2008; Perry, 2012). When we use the ideological model of literacy, it's easier

to illuminate the multiple layers of participation in an unequal society, it gives us a more

nuanced view of the affordances and limitations of literacy programs.

I will borrow the idea of "autonomous" to describe family literacy programs and a variety

of family engagement strategies below. It is possible that programs and engagement efforts fail

to acknowledge how various cultural, economic, linguistic, and racial differences play into the

experiences of non-dominant families in educational institutions built on White middle-class

norms (Auerbach, 2007; Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander &

Hernandez, 2013; Cooper, 2007 & 2009; Wilson, 2015a).

Placing Families in the Context of Family Literacy Approaches

Family literacy research grew out of rich descriptive ethnographic research of the 1980s and 90s. Seminal work from Denny Taylor (1983) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) in the United States shed light on the home literacy practices White, middle-class families and later, African American families.

In a later book, *Many Families, Many Literacies*, edited by Taylor (1997), she explains what she sees as the problem with autonomous approaches to family literacy,

> The recent focus on family literacy that is seemingly designed to bring more literacy to parents and children is an effort to shift the blame for poverty and underemployment onto the people least responsible for and least able to struggle against the systematic inequalities of modern societies (p. 2).

Both Street and Taylor insist upon viewing literacy as interconnected to the social realities of children and families. In the following section I highlight some of the ideological models of family literacy in the Latinx and African American communities.

Family literacy in Latinx communities

Developers of what Rodriguez-Brown calls "enrichment programs" are cognizant of and build upon the assets of the community. Educators identify the assets of the community by tapping into what Moll et al. (1992) call their *funds of knowledge.*

In their work with teacher-researchers within Mexican American communities in the Southwest United States, Moll et al. (1992) describe the sources of knowledge that are found locally in the homes and communities of children as "funds of knowledge". This concept, originated from a 1990 study by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg in the field of anthropology, was applied within the field of education by Moll and his collaborators. Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) describe funds of knowledge as the "strategic and

cultural resources…that households contain" (p.313). The concept is further described in Moll et al. (1992) as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" that allow families and communities to function.

Reporting on their study of cultural practices within households and classrooms in an Arizona community, Moll et al. (1992) noted a key difference in the kind of learning relationships children had in their homes compared to schools. They explained that within their homes,

> …these networks are flexible, adaptive, and active, and may involve multiple persons from outside the homes; in our terms, they are 'thick' and 'multi-stranded,' meaning that one may have multiple relationships with the same person or with various persons. The person from whom the child learns carpentry, for example, may also be the uncle with whom the child's family regularly celebrates birthdays or organizes barbecues, as well as the person with whom the child's father goes fishing on weekends. (p.133)

On the other hand, within classrooms, the researchers found that the relationships between teachers and their students were "thin" and "single-stranded" (p. 134), with a narrow focus on the students' school-focused performance. Moll et al. (1992) further called attention to the ways teachers often lacked an understanding of students' "funds of knowledge" and their lives and communities outside of school.

Overlooking or disregarding students' funds of knowledge is especially prevalent for bilingual children who are often labeled as Limited English Proficient (LEP) in schools, with the US education system often not valuing their linguistic knowledge in multiple languages (Souto-Manning, 2016). This shallow understanding of students' and

families' resources leads to a deficit perspective where communities are viewed as lacking due to linguistic, cultural, or socioeconomic indicators that differ from the school-based norms. Moll and Greenberg (1990) emphasize the learning that occurs in all communities saying,

> Without a focus on social relationships and person-in-activities, it is very easy for outsiders (educators) to underestimate the wealth of funds of knowledge available in working-class households. Funds of knowledge are available regardless of the families' years of formal schooling or prominence assigned to literacy. (p.327)

The work of Moll, Greenberg, and their colleagues (1990; 1992) bring issues of socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity into focus through a sociocultural frame. Instead of being marginalized, the funds of knowledge approach centers families and communities as rich sites of learning and potential connection. In a recent article, Moll (2019) explained how the funds of knowledge approach had been taken up in various ways, saying, "At the heart of the approach is establishing strategic alliances for teaching and learning, developing new capacities and capabilities, and engaging pedagogically in ways that respect the students' social history and intellect" (p. 137).

Compton-Lilly et al. (2020) note that even though the popular funds of knowledge approach highlights the utility of a strengths-based orientation to families and communities, the practices, they say, "have failed to explicitly disrupt silences related to poverty and racism" (Kirkland, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, Noguera, 2016 as cited in Compton-Lilly et al. 2020, p. 280).

Related to the critiques of Compton-Lilly et al (2020), some literacy studies utilize conceptual frameworks that pair funds of knowledge concepts with a race-conscious focus.

Yosso's (2005) "community cultural wealth", a strengths-based critical race theory (CRT) concept, is defined as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77).

There are few examples of research which incorporate family literacy with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, such as Larrotta and Yamamura's (2011) study of Latinx mothers participating in a family literacy program. The researchers found that participants gained social, familial, and aspirational capital—all asset-based concepts from Yosso's framework—over the course of the school-based program. Another race-conscious family literacy study focused ESL classes for Latinx and Asian immigrant communities. Chao and Montero (2014) introduced the "family literacy ecologies of communities" framework. The authors claim that the church-based ESL programs are "critical language and literacy learning spaces to empower immigrant parents' agency in accessing social, economic, and educational resources and power for their families and communities" (p108). These two examples include school and church spaces as sites for family literacy.

Though not conducted through a critical race theory lens, the seminal work of Rodriguez-Brown (2009) also focused on Latinx communities participating in an out-of-school family literacy program through the University of Chicago. In the book about this experience, she writes,

> Family literacy programs for culturally and linguistically different parents should address parents' personal goals, value families' knowledge and language, regard families as resources, and provide parents with access to information and resources that encourage children's success. Program activities should build on existing home literacy practices rather than expect parents to abandon their culturally relevant ways and adopt mainstream

literacy practices, which foster a school-like transfer of skills or knowledge from parent to child. (p. 60)

The FLAME program was based in Chicago elementary schools and consisted of two components: parents as teachers and parents as learners. The "parents as teachers" segment was the family literacy portion, but it was delivered to just the parents in preparation for them to try new activities with their children later. The 13 family literacy sessions included "creating home literacy centers", "book sharing", "library visit", "teaching the ABCs", "children's writing", and "community literacy" (p.66). The "parents as learners" segment was adult training in GED or ESL classes based on their individual desires or needs. Rodriguez-Brown talked about the family literacy program as a bridge between home and school. Over many years, and with assessments such as DIBELS and ISEL, the study demonstrated that children whose mothers were involved in the FLAME program "had significant and/or faster development in literacy skills" (p.97). Beyond children's literacy skills, the participating mothers also self-reported increased confidence in teaching their children and in participating in school activities. At the end of the finding chapter, Rodriguez-Brown adds observational data that may seem extraneous in a literacy study, but is an interesting side effect of the kind of program she built,

> By building on parents' awareness of their own cultural and family knowledge, we enhance their sense of self-efficacy…Before becoming involved in FLAME, many of the mothers in our program never left their house without their husband. Since their work in FLAME, they have been able to make friends, go to the library, and take public transportation. FLAME is a family literacy program, but it has impacted families in unplanned ways that go beyond literacy. (p. 110).

In the beginning, the mothers were naming "language and cultural barriers" (p. 14) as roadblocks to their engagement in school spaces. The program not only supported their learning and their children's learning but also created a network and community to lean on.

In a reflection on the purpose of family literacy programs, after critiques of what she calls "deficit-based models", Rodriguez-Brown states her opinion, "Family literacy should be a two-way street where homes and schools support each other in providing children with opportunities to learn and succeed in school and in life, no matter what their differences in culture and/or language" (p. 52).

Another example of a Latinx family literacy program was one designed by university researchers in partnership with a community organization and teachers from an elementary school. According to Wessels (2014), the program was an eight-week program focused on teaching Latinx, English learning parents to use story sharing techniques while reading in their home language of Spanish. Parents reported learning about the importance of using their home language to support literacy development of their children as well as identifying ways to incorporate story sharing in their daily routines.

In each of the above examples, the family literacy program serves to build upon the existing knowledge and literacy practices of families to create a supportive and enriching environment for their children. Despite a focus on the assets of Latinx communities, it's important to recognize the barriers to literacy families may experience including immigrant parents with low-literacy levels and limited years of formal schooling, family members with undocumented immigrant status, and higher rates of poverty. Dearing, Sibley, and Nguyen (2015) identify the ways that beyond schools, community agencies can be a supportive factor in the lives of immigrant families:

Although much work has focused on the importance of school–family connections, fewer

scholars have focused on the third critical factor: communities (Dearing et al., 2015).

Community agencies can provide material and social supports to schools and families,

which may be especially useful to disadvantaged students and their families. Community

partners can provide academic supports including tutoring and supplies to school. (p. 24)

A variety of family literacy programs may benefit Latinx children and families learning English

including programs designed to support parents in their role as teacher and as a space for

networking.

Family literacy with African American families. Family literacy scholars have also

highlighted the experiences of African American families in the context of the United States.

Denny Taylor, who coined the term *"family literacy"* with her 1983 book that focused on middle

class White families, later went on to study African American families (Taylor, 1996; Taylor &

Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) which highlighted family strengths and called into light the systemic

inequalities African American families endured in U.S. schools.

Gadsden (1992) used interviews to illuminate the historic and generational context to

understand what literacy means to four generations of African American families in rural South

Carolina. She opens the article with, "Literacy and education are valuable and valued

possessions that African American families have respected, revered, and sought as a means to

personal freedom and communal hope, from enslavement to the present" (p. 352). In the larger

study, Gadsden interviews four generations of family members from a small rural community in

South Carolina. For this article, she reflects on the 25 interviews from the first generation, all

people in their 70s and 80s at the time of the data collection; putting this into context she states,

"more than one half of the informants are the children of parents who were enslaved, and are

then, thus, the first generation in their families to have been born free" (p. 359). The reflections of these elders on their own literacy development and then that of their children and grandchildren indicated that they saw a difference between literacy which was accessed in schools and education which was developed within the community. A quote from one of the interview participants, 82-yr-old Ms. Lennie, ended the article,

> We never really thought about literacy as people call it now…So, if you want to know how I would define literacy as a Black person, let's say it's reading; let's say it's writing and knowing how to survive this world—and most of all knowing how to combine all these things so you appreciate who you are as a Black person and so that you never forget your history. (Gadsden, 1992, p. 367)

Her findings indicate that families described literacy as a new freedom for their generation, as personal and political power and notable in their small-town community, as a way to participate in the religious community. Beyond literacy, education was the community and cultural knowledge needed to maintain status within the small community. Gadsden's work continues to engage the field of family literacy from a literacy-in-context view (2017, 2004) including her particular focus on fathers in family literacy contexts (2003 & 2012).

More recently, using a family-resiliency framework, Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2017) present a qualitative study of 20 low-income African American mothers of rising kindergarteners whose children are enrolled in Head Start programs. In this article, race is continuously mentioned, often alongside other "risk-factors" for students heading into kindergarten such as low socioeconomic status, maternal education level, and household structure (one parent, two parent, etc.), and number of children in the family. The dominant story told about low-income African American children in the literature is that this group of children do not have the literacy

skills necessary to be prepared for kindergarten. The authors reframe the traditional perception of

not only African American mothers but also the men and other family members in their lives.

Through qualitative interviews the researchers found that these mothers were actively engaged in

preparing their children for kindergarten, they worked with other family members and friends to

create *literacy teams* who worked together on literacy with the child, and they had a "*division of

literacy labor*" where literacy tasks were divided up strategically amongst team members. These

teams consisted of adults (resident and nonresident partners, husbands, grandparents, aunts,

uncles, etc.) and minors (siblings, cousins, neighbors, etc.). This elaborate network of cultural

and social resources is concealed in quantitative analysis and revealed in using qualitative

methods.

In an earlier paper, Jarret, Hamilton, & Coba-Rodriguez (2015), used qualitative

interviews to emphasize family strengths and found evidence of an assortment of family literacy

activities and a variety of family members involved in promoting early literacy for preschoolers.

In the next section, I overview family engagement literature focused on communities where

family literacy programs are omnipresent: communities with concentrated poverty, communities

of color, and communities with large populations of immigrants or non-(standard) English

speakers.

Critical Family Engagement

Educational institutions such as schools and community centers act as sites of connection

between families and their broader communities. These institutions are saturated in the macro-

level influences of dominant cultural norms and policies based on middle class, White families

such as individualism, meritocracy, and competition. Research has shown that "parent

involvement" is an indicator of academic achievement, regardless of family demographics

(Epstein, 1984; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Because of this correlation between families being involved and school achievement, family engagement is required (e.g., to receive federal Title I funds) and is often implemented as a simple, or autonomous, checklist or action plan for how to involve families in school-based activities.

The review of literature shows that there has been a paradigm shift, in lexicon at least, from involvement to engagement. Mapp (2012, p. 3) describes this shift saying there has been an evolution of the term "parental involvement" to "family engagement". The former described how parents are involved in school-sanctioned events and the school-like ways they are supporting their children at home (Olivos, 2006). As noted in Chapter 1, family engagement describes how a broader notion of families (beyond parents) can be engaged in partnerships among students, teachers, and community stakeholders (Mapp, 2012). *Critical family engagement* refers to partnerships between families and educational stakeholders that work to shift the power more equitably into the hands of typically less-powerful stakeholders like parents and even students.

Family engagement literature highlights the experiences of non-dominant communities who often suffer from inequitable institutions, policies, and practices the most. The term "nondominant" communities refers to communities that suffer from marginalization through the powerful forces of dominant culture that controls institutions, policies, and practices (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016). These communities include any historically marginalized community: communities of color, low-income communities, immigrant communities, linguistically diverse, and ethnically diverse communities who are not considered to be a part of the dominant group that reflects White, middle-class norms (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Gutierrez, 2008). Barajas-Lopez and Ishimaru (2016) explain how deficit narratives about families are revealed through check-list style family engagement strategies,

conventional approaches to engaging nondominant parents in education—for example, attendance at school open houses, parent–teacher conferences, and parent–teacher association meetings—are rooted in conceptions of parents and families as deficient, sometimes lacking knowledge, skills, capital, and capacities, and at other times, as lacking more fundamentally in caring or will (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Valencia & Black, 2002), (p. 2).

The conceptions of non-dominant parents and families as deficient are rooted in inequality on a societal level and affect how parents and families are perceived. The conceptions also affect and limit the roles they can play in schools and in their children's education.

Sociopolitical barriers to engagement

In her study with school leaders, S. Auerbach (2007) harkens to the sociopolitical systems that influence family engagement, "The unequal distribution of economic, human, cultural, and social capital—in addition to schools' devaluing of the resources of lower SES families—constrain parents' involvement options, inclinations, and relations with schools" (p. 251). In the United States, economic disparity, racialization of communities, and a history of unequal policies from segregation to red lining in the housing market are all implicated in the vast inequality present in schools across the country. These unequal circumstances permeate society at all levels and in all spaces. Oppression in educational spaces, present as both a tool and a product of this stratification of resources and racial and socioeconomic hierarchies, limits the variety of ways families are perceived to be engaging in the child's education.

Critical research in the field of family engagement focuses on how power is operationalized within institutions. Barajas-Lopez and Ishimaru (2016) describe the common roles families fill in educational spaces saying, "nondominant families continue to hold spaces in

education as clients and beneficiaries, or as instrumental levers of power as individual consumers" (p. 3). The roles they often do not hold are roles such as decision-maker, knowledgeable other, an educational resource and ally. With this in mind, an important feature of critical family engagement is acknowledging (with all stakeholders) the societal systems of oppression and power that permeate all educational spaces, such as racism, classism, immigration status, and xenophobia.

When we critically engage families, there must be a recognition of how power, oppression, and resistance affect families and how different communities have access to more or less power. The family engagement literature points to practices that balance this power through asset-thinking and authentic engagement of families which allows for acts of resistance. Some examples of this type of engagement include cultural brokering (Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007), notions of care and critical care (Valenzuela, 1999; Wilson, 2015b), and inclusive and collaborative models of authentic, power-sharing school-home partnerships (Auerbach, 2007; Stefanski, Valli, Jacobson, 2016).

The salience of race in family engagement. Critical family engagement literature explores how non-dominant families navigate and experience school spaces. Specificity and attention to the cultural, social, and linguistic norms and practices of each community is important for understanding the specific interaction between home, community, and school. Many scholars of African American-focused family engagement include the historical and sociopolitical context in their work. For instance, in a recent article on family engagement, Delale-O'Connor, Huguley, Parr and Wang (2020) state the utmost importance of keeping race salient, "Failing to consider and ultimately centralize race in caregivers' engagement with their

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children's education not only ignores the historical and contemporary salience of race and racism to caregiving experiences but further norms Whiteness as central to theory and practice in caregiver engagement" (p. 1913). Scholars focused on Latinx family engagement also bring specific lenses regarding language, citizenship, and racialized discourses within the context of exacerbated economic inequality in the United States (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Hill & Torres, 2010; Torres & Hurtado-Vivas, 2011). The Latinx family engagement experience is influenced by a variety of factors including if families identify as immigrants (including 2nd and 3rd generation) and the varying cultural, language, and educational backgrounds they bring from their countries of origin.

It's crucial to understand the historical and contemporary context of neighborhoods and educational institutions in order to fully comprehend how a program is functioning today. In the following section, I will introduce my conceptual framework which includes a mechanism for analyzing programs and the organizational cultures that influence them by drawing upon a sociopolitical-infused ecological model.

Part III Conceptual Framework:

A Critical Sociocultural View of Family Literacy and Family Engagement

The literature overview highlights the culturally constructed nature of learning, in general, and literacy, in particular. Through a sociocultural theory lens, literacy and literacy education are viewed as cultural activities. Literacy learners are situated as participants in complex and inherently valuable systems in and out of educational institutions. Language and literacy are co-constructed within a social space with whom Vygotsky (1978) would call "more

knowledgeable others", including parents and caregivers, teachers, peers —anyone who can guide the learner (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

I am conducting this study of family engagement and family literacy at a nonprofit organization within this sociocultural framework. In a review of literature, Rodriguez-Brown (2010) draws upon previous research (e.g., Gutierrez, 2002) saying, "a sociocultural perspective of family literacy argues that literacy learning cannot be abstracted from the cultural practices and the context of its development" (p. 734). Literacy researchers who employ sociocultural theories consider the ways humans develop through social interactions, environments, culture, and shared languages and histories (Gutierrez, 2002; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Heath, 1983; Moll, Amani, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Purcell-Gates, 1995). Importantly, each of these interactions, environments, languages, and histories are connected to the larger societal belief systems that attach value and hierarchy to certain practices.

Therefore, I view engagement and literacy learning from a *critical sociocultural orientation,* which Lewis and Moje (2003) theorize as a move from sociocultural theory,

> to address this lack of attention to larger issues of power (and to identity and agency in relationship to issues of power) in traditional versions of sociocultural theory, we offer a perspective on learning that makes evident the role of power, at both the micro and macro levels (p. 1992).

From this perspective, it is insufficient to view cultural practices and contexts without the consideration of power and oppression. The research questions that drive this study explore the experiences of various stakeholders based on their roles, identities, and power within the organization. Because I view learning from a sociocultural perspective, I hope to understand how power and oppression, or reproduction and resistance, operate from the perspective of

Neighborhood Strong stakeholders involved at a variety of levels of the organization, from individual to institutional and from proximal to distal.

As a conceptual tool for designing the study, I sought an ecological model that creates possibilities for illuminating the nuance present in our society. In the following section I will introduce a layered model for my conceptual framework.

Using a Multilevel Sociopolitical Framework

In order to capture some of the complexity of the context of this study and to incorporate attention to power, agency, race, and class, I will draw from McKinney de Royston and Nasir's (2017) *multilevel sociopolitical framework*. This is a nuanced ecological framework which incorporates larger societal trends when considering how racialization functions within learning spaces. McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) draw upon the framework to use it to analyze the learning environments in the city of Oakland, CA, including particular schools and classrooms within the city. In this study, I will apply the framework to Detroit and a nonprofit community-based educational space. The ecological model addresses four levels of interaction from the largest to smallest realm of society: social, institutional, cultural, and individual. McKinney de Royston & Nasir (2017) describe the utility of their framework in a complex, racialized environment,

> Unlike prior cultural-ecological and sociocultural perspectives, however, this framework is distinctly sociopolitical because it accounts for the co-constructive, bi-directional nature of human development and learning that is indelibly ensconced within dynamics of power. It captures the reproductive, top-down nature of dominant forces that shape human development and learning, as well as the resistant, disruptive, and possibly transformative forces that emerge from the bottom up" (p. 262)

The utility of this framework is that broad scope of understanding individual family participation within a broader, complex system with often-competing norms and values. Unlike critical sociocultural theory or ecological theory alone, the framework enables a broader view of bi-directional power and agency, socioeconomic status, culture, race, ethnicity, and language when exploring the family literacy programs and family engagement strategies that an organization employs.

Figure 2.1

Multilevel sociopolitical framework adapted from McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017)
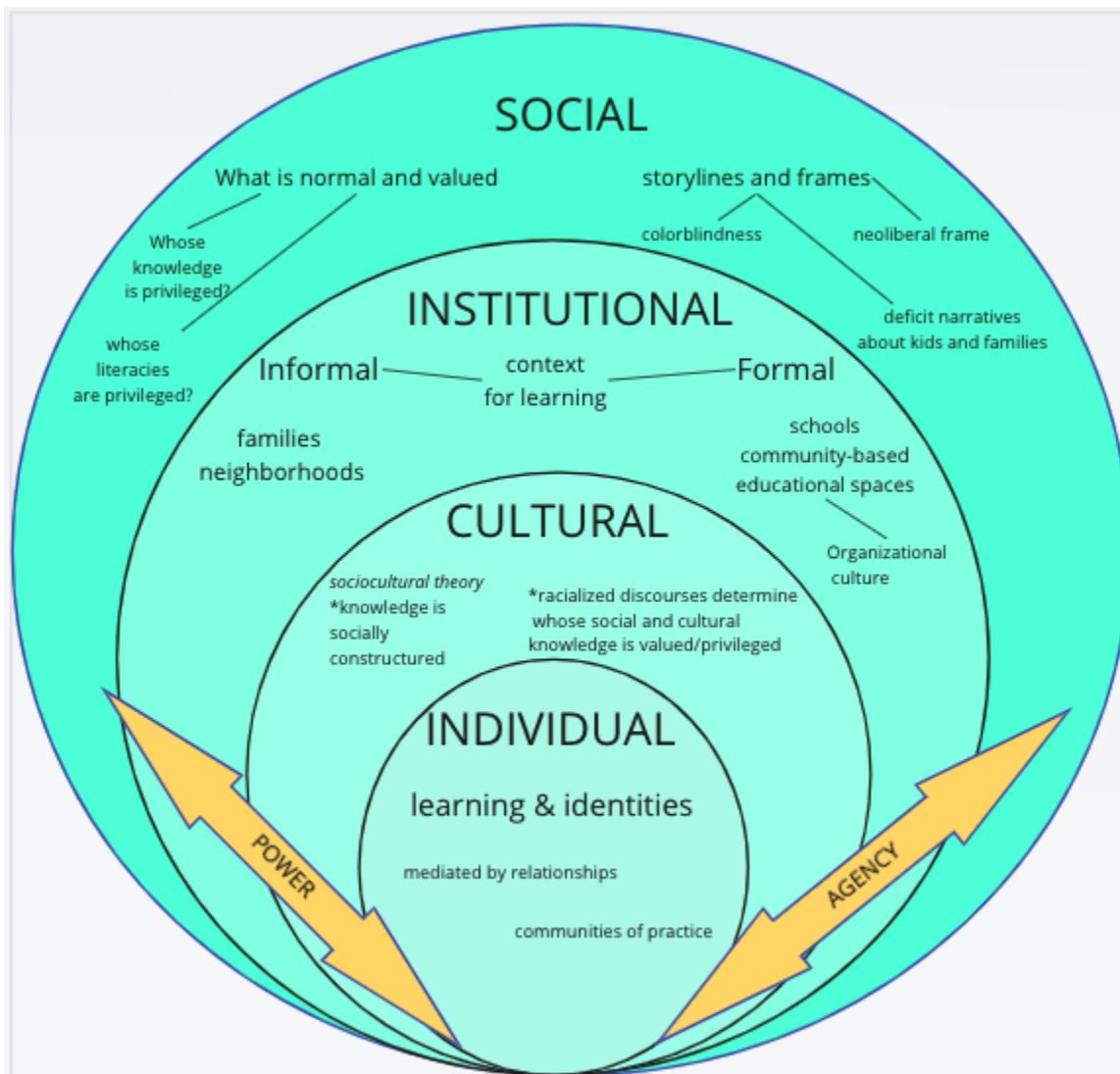
Social Level

The social level is considered most influential in this model. It represents what is normal and valued in society and is responsible for the dominant narratives that influence and organize the rest of society. In the United States, dominant narratives are inextricably linked to our long history of anti-Black racism and racialization of non-White people, histories, languages, and cultures as "other" and "deficient" (as also noted earlier in the literature review). McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) highlight two recurring storylines that make up the "social" level of the U.S. context: colorblindness and neoliberalism, both of which have implications for marginalized populations.

Colorblindness. One of the dominant beliefs that keep race unnamed in our society is the idea that we are colorblind, that as a society we have moved beyond seeing each other in racial categories. Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes the insidious and destructive nature of colorblind racism:

> Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-Civil Rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards (p. 2).

In order to study the Neighborhood Strong organization, it's important to understand the dominant narratives influencing the various stakeholders, from participating families of color with young children to the predominately White volunteers and everyone in between.

Neoliberalism. The neoliberal frame is another contemporary storyline that has had major implications for education in the United States. Neoliberal reforms have pushed the notion that

education should be marketized and quantifiable. Measurable outcomes such as high stakes testing, and teacher ratings have produced inequitable learning environments for the most vulnerable children in schools such as those living in areas of concentrated poverty, English learners, and students of color. Spence (2015) discusses how nontraditional stakeholders have become key players in the neoliberal era of education, "Venture philanthropists have transformed the educational terrain, significantly tilting it in a neoliberal direction, often using their expressed desire to help hard-hit communities to support their interests in changing the face of public education" (p.96). Altogether, understanding the social level of the context with an understanding of these two key storylines is important to how I explore the various aspects of the organization.

Institutional Level

Within the social level is the institutional level which represents the settings and contexts for learning. As understood from sociocultural theories of learning, there are informal settings such as families and neighborhoods and there are formal settings for learning such as schools and community-based organizations.

In reference to the various contexts for literacy learning, Perry (2012) says, "...in order to truly understand literacy and learners, educators must see literacy and learners in all contexts, not just in the contexts of schooling" (p. 66). Institutional level features also include how the settings for learning are mediated by the dominant and racialized storylines including colorblindness and neoliberalism. In many ways, the instructor or representative of formal institutions influences how much of these storylines are reproduced and re-enforced or how much they are rewritten or pushed back upon. In a community-based educational setting that requires partner organizations and volunteers to deliver much of the literacy and language programs, it is important to

understand these unspoken scripts and beliefs that underlie the delivery. Because this study's final research question inquires about the culture and systems in place in the Neighborhood Strong organization, I utilize two concepts from the scholarship on organizational culture: social enterprise and servant leadership. I draw upon these concepts to extend my consideration of how the structures and systems of the organization support the mission and culture.

Social enterprise in institutions. Nonprofits take many forms, including those run like traditional businesses, institutions, and start-ups. According to Kikul and Lyons (2016), social entrepreneurship is a combination of the private and public sector, enabling entrepreneurs to attempt to solve seemingly intractable social problems with enterprises that include these features: being nimble and agile- not bureaucratic; not relying on transaction but transformation; building, maintaining, and utilizing capital with its focus on networking to focus on a problem; and, being mission-focused, accountable to society, fostering social and environmental innovation, circumnavigating politics, and facilitating development by lending equity and stability (p. 7-8).

Social enterprises can take various for-profit shapes. I focus on the relevance of nonprofit social enterprises. Saebi, Foss, & Linder (2019) describe nonprofits that operate as social enterprises as including "income-generating activities [which] must have a strategic long-term orientation with measurable growth and revenue targets" (p.74). Nonprofit organizations, often seen as institutional, have increasingly become more business-like since the 1980s. Through a systematic review of literature, Maier, Meyer, and Steinbereithner (2016) found that moving toward a business model had effects on the types of knowledge that were valued in a nonprofit space. They found that becoming more business-like moved nonprofits away from valuing knowledge based on relationships, identities, and understanding such as empathy and religion. It

also reproduced neoliberalism, individualizing problems, and affirming markets as solution providers. Interestingly, they also found, "knowledge effects can also flow in the opposite direction, when hybrid organizations challenge traditional economic assumptions" Business-like approaches in nonprofits may also support the neoliberal policies that weaken the support for the common good and place the power in the hands of those with capital to sustain the work.

One of the seminal social enterprise scholars, Dees (1998) claims that social entrepreneurs play the role of "change agents" in the social sector by: adopting a mission to create and sustain social value; engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning; and exhibiting a heightened sense of accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created (p. 4).

A nonprofit that operates as a social enterprise does so with a business infrastructure and a leadership team that is focused on the social benefits of the model. There are many ways to enact leadership within a social enterprise; as I discuss in the individual section below, enacting servant leadership puts a focus on being in service not to the mission itself but to the staff and community.

Cultural Level

Next in McKinney de Royston and Nasir's (2017) *multilevel sociopolitical framework* is consideration of the cultural level. The cultural level comprises the practices and activities of communities and contends that knowledge is socially constructed and shared through such practices. The authors discuss the research base for the social aspects of learning at this level which includes Vygotsky (1978), Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). McKinney de Royston and Nasir posit that what is missing is the notion of power when understanding the

socially constructed nature of learning. In many ways, racialized storylines determine which cultural practices and activities are considered valued and prioritized in society. As reviewed in the family literacy and family engagement literature, what is valued in schools is often standardized to reflect White, middle class, monolingual norms.

Community-based educational spaces may have more flexibility to create a more community-responsive culture, but these decisions may be affected by outside forces such as funders asking for school-standards aligned data or curriculum (Baldridge et al., 2017). Access to culturally relevant curriculum, pedagogies, and spaces is related to power and hegemony across learning environments.

The agents of cultural activities and practices make a difference in which types of activities are privileged. Within formal and informal educational spaces, the existence of cultural and linguistic brokers is a way of mediating various practices and activities for closer alignment or understanding (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, and Meza, 2003; Perry, 2009).

In educational spaces, authorities such as teachers and program facilitators can influence which discourses are valued and accepted within the space. Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) describe the importance of trusting relationships and emphasize they help mediate learning, "the social process of teaching and learning in the classroom can only be improved by building rapport and relationships of *confianza*, mutual trust, based on increased understanding between teachers and students with their families" (p. 191). Research on successful teaching of African American and Latinx students underlines the importance of the cultural agents (like teachers) and activities (like curriculum and norms) for nondominant students including culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lucas & Villegas, 2010). In the context of a community based educational space, there may be more opportunity to develop

culturally responsive materials and to develop culturally responsive staff for literacy program facilitation.

Individual level

The individual in this framework is never considered alone- social theories of learning undergird even the smallest level of analysis including the notion that relationships mediate an individual's learning through communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The multilevel sociopolitical frame is a useful tool for viewing learning from a sociocultural theory lens to explore how individuals and organizations learn and grow. Because of the ecological nature of this framework, it is also possible to overlay important societal contexts like colorblind and neoliberal frames that impact the individual– be it a family member, staff member, or high-level leader in an organization– while they operate within their various contexts.

McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) describe this as "the level in which racial or ethnic identities, academic or domain-specific identities, and professional identities intertwine with processes of learning and development" (p. 268) while noting that "a neoliberal frame places limitations on individual identity and learning" (p. 269) because of predetermined and limiting notions of what a successful student is and what valuable knowledge or literacies are within a school or classroom space.

As noted by McKinney de Royston and Nasir, individual *professional* identities, too, are developed within the individual level context To help me analyze the professional identities of Neighborhood Strong staff members, I consider the relevance of servant leadership characteristics at this level too. Servant leadership requires leaders to be "others-focused" and

help create a follower-centric work environment which supports individualized growth and development (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114).

Servant leadership and love in institutions. A type of leadership philosophy introduced in the 1970s, servant leadership is exemplified by the valuing of service to others over self-interests (Greenleaf, 1977). Yukl (2012) reports that the core differentiating feature of servant leadership [from other forms of transformational leadership] remains that others should be able to observe, over time, that servant leaders place their followers (and others-) first in their actions.

Greenleaf (1977) described a way to understand the impact of servant leaders saying, ''The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?' (p. 62). In this way the philosophy is generative in that it ideally produces more servant leaders who had been incubated within that style of leadership. Servant leadership relies on the relationship between leader and followers (or organizational directors and staff). Some organizational literature incorporates the link between servant leadership and compassionate love. In theorizing how servant leaders utilize love, van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) say,

> Compassionate love is harmonious with servant leadership to the extent that servant leaders must have such great love for the followers that they are willing to learn the gifts and talents of each one of the followers. The leader that leads with compassionate love has a focus on the employee first, then on the talents of the employee, and lastly on how this benefits the organization (p. 121)

A 2019 systematic review of the literature by leadership scholars led to an updated definition of the concept:

> Servant leadership is an (1) other-oriented approach to leadership (2) manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, (3) and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community. (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114)

As a framework of leadership, servant leaders at the institutional level focus on their followers or employees through a holistic approach, viewing each as individuals worthy of their time and attention. Considering the presence (or absence) of the various servant leadership characteristics described above while exploring the organizational culture will illuminate how power is conceptualized and distributed (or not) between leaders and followers.

Altogether, the various parts of my conceptual framework will allow me to analyze the data collected while telescoping between a macro and a micro view—from the societal level to the individual level—to understand how families experience literacy programs in neighborhood hubs and how staff and leaders experience their roles and experiences of the organization. By using the multilevel sociopolitical framework, infused with attention to social entrepreneurship and servant leadership ideals, I will not only examine the case of an educational nonprofit from macro to micro levels, but I will also analyze dynamics of power and agency, reproduction and resistance, as they relate to the dominant narratives about families in Detroit. Baldridge (2020) describes the paradox of community-based education spaces within the United States saying, "CBES can be transformative, yet their paradoxical nature as potential spaces of liberation as well as sites of containment that reify deficit perspectives and racist discourses about minoritized youth is rarely considered" (p.619). The conceptual framework outlined above will aid me in

exploring if the paradox Baldrige describes holds true when describing Neighborhood Strong. In

the following chapter, I will outline the methodology and research design used in the case study.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

The aim of this research was to explore the ways one education-focused nonprofit enacted their mission across the culture and structures of the organization and through neighborhood hubs in the city of Detroit. Through this exploratory case study, I aimed to gain a better understanding of the organizational model used to support the implementation of neighborhood hubs throughout the city, particularly the ways in which the organization prepares staff to engage families. In this study, hub-specific literacy programs are a level of the case that allowed me to observe families and staff interacting and engaging in literacy work together. Interviews with community members allowed me to highlight the experiences of community members who participate in programs at the neighborhood hubs. I worked to contextualize the experiences of families with young children, community members, and staff within the larger sociopolitical, economic, and educational histories of the city of Detroit.

Qualitative Methodology

Because the aim of the study was to explore specific geographic and virtual spaces, the experiences of a diverse set of people all associated with one organization, and the events of this organization during a particular time— from September 2020 to September 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic— a qualitative approach was needed. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) describe qualitative research saying, "it is essentially constructivist in the sense that it is concerned with how the complexities of the social and cultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context and at a particular point in time" (p.42). A qualitative research approach to exploring the work of Neighborhood Strong was necessary in

order to understand the various perspectives of stakeholders. In literacy research, qualitative approaches "suggest the need to consider and make visible the voices of particular individuals, participants, groups, and communities that have traditionally not been heard" (Metz, 1999, p. 374). A qualitative approach allowed me to hear the voices of the stakeholders across various positions in the organization but gave me the distinct opportunity to "make visible" the voices of African American and Latinx community members who can share how they and their families experience the organization.

Case Study Design

Within the qualitative domain, I found case study to be the appropriate genre for pursuing the research questions. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) describe this methodology by saying, "Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the richness and complexity of a bounded social phenomenon" (p.49). This dissertation study is informed by case studies in the field of literacy (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 1995) and family engagement (e.g., Ishimaru et al., 2016; Weiss, Dearing, Mayer, Kreider, & McCartney, 2005) all situated in various sociocultural contexts that explore the complexity of a case.

Case study allows me to incorporate and explore the complexity across the organization. For instance, there are various departments, roles, and positions that are taken up by people in and from various places geographically and from either inside or outside of the organization spaces. Stake (2005b) says, "the case is singular, but it has subsections, groups, occasions, groups, dimensions, and domains...Each of these may have its own contexts and the contexts may go a long way toward making relationships understandable. Qualitative case study calls for the examination of these complexities" (p.449). There are many levels of complexity in this exploration of an organization that operates by promoting relationships and community building

within "high needs" (Neighborhood Strong website) African American and Latinx neighborhoods while accruing a large portion of its operating budget from the power-laden business relationships of the philanthropic co-founder who resides in a wealthy suburb outside of the city.

Stake (2005b) describes the need for contextualizing the case in several ways, "Historical context is almost always of interest, but so are cultural and physical contexts. Other contexts of interest are the social, economic, political, ethical, and aesthetic" (p.449). The young organization has its own recent historical, social, cultural and economic contexts but the nature of Neighborhood Strong is that this relatively nascent organization taps into uniquely complex neighborhood contexts within the extraordinary historical, social, political, economic, physical, and cultural contexts of the city of Detroit.

Because of the historical context of the majority African American city, I will use this case study to pursue a holistic understanding of the experiences of neighborhood participants as well as staff. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) explains that case study "is typically able to avoid the kind of essentialist and context-free analyses that have historically been harmful to disempowered groups" (p.256). This study of a rapidly expanding nonprofit organization into neighborhoods throughout the city of Detroit will allow me to situate the two neighborhoods within their own specific context and within the larger context of the history of education, literacy, family engagement, and power dynamics of the city itself.

Levels of the Case

As I proceed, I will focus on the organization as the unit of analysis through an embedded case study "which involves looking at one case but includes looking at several levels or units of analysis" (Lune & Burg, 2017, p. 171). The figure below shows the organization as the unit of

analysis and the overlapping levels of analysis including: the staff and structure of the

organization, the neighborhood hubs, and the literacy-affiliated programs and partners

Triangulation of data sources

      The case study design calls for a triangulation of data, which Baxter and Jack (2008) call

"a hallmark of case study research" (p. 554). The purpose of triangulation is to increase validity

by supporting evidence through multiple perspectives. I sought to answer questions through a

series of semi-structured interviews, observations of staff meetings and community programs,

and a collection of artifacts. In the table below, I describe in more detail the amount of each data

source I collected.

Table 3.1

Data collection overview

Data type (# of participants)	Frequency/Time	Total
Interview: global team (8)	2 interviews/1 hour x 8 participants	16 hours
Interview: manager team/support team (1 per site)	2 interview/1 hr x 3 participants	6 hours
Interview: community members (4 per site)	1 interview/30 minutes x 8 participants	4 hours
Interview: board members (3)	1 interviews/1 hour x 3 participants	2 hours
Other stakeholders: partner organization and facilitator (2)	2 interviews/.5 hour x 2participants	1 hours
Interviews		**29 hours**
Observations: Global staff meetings (8)	8 observations/1.5 hr x 8 occurrences	12 hours
Observations: Manager staff meetings (8)	8 observations/1.5 hr x 8 occurrences	12 hours
Observations: Fundraiser event	1 observation/1 hr	1 hour

Observations: Programming with a focus on literacy and/or community building and/or "listening sessions" at Southwest	13 observations/ 30-120 minutes each x 5 literacy programs	13 hours
Observations: Programming with a focus on literacy and/or community building and/or "listening sessions" Dexter-Linwood	13 observations/30-120 minutes each x 5 literacy programs	13 hours
Observations		**51 hours**
Artifacts: staff development document	Ex: training documents; on-boarding documents	
Artifacts: staff observations	Ex: staff meeting agendas and handouts	
Artifacts: organization media	Ex: org website and social media pages, mass emails, participant and volunteer calendars; fundraising	
Artifacts: neighborhood development documents	Ex: neighborhood advisory council handbook	
Artifacts: program-related	Ex: posters, handouts, materials, participant work from literacy programs; neighborhood calendars	
Artifacts: neighborhood level	Photographs of hubs, flyers and notices on bulletin boards, photographs of surrounding neighborhood	
Artifacts		**Several Dozen**

As noted in Chapter 1, Neighborhood Strong has seen significant growth since it opened the first location. Their model appears to bring something that neighborhoods want, as evidenced by the organization's consistent growth across the city, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Saldaña (2011) says, "A case may be chosen deliberately because of its unique character, thus presenting itself as a rich opportunity and exemplar for focused study…" (p.9). Neighborhood Strong has a unique, complex system of neighborhood and organization-wide staff positions, partners, and

participants that come together in various places and spaces to serve neighborhood communities. The organization uses a unique distribution model that seems to be distinctive in structure and practice from any others in the city, warranting deeper inquiry.

Critical methodological approach

As with other educational spaces, there is the need to further explore the dynamics of power, ethnocentrism, monolingualism, and other forms of hegemony that exist in family literacy and in engagement spaces outside of schools. Because of these realities, I applied a critical methodological approach to the case study to better understand the systems of the organization and how they do (or do not) support the stated needs and desires of African American and Latinx community members and those of stakeholders in other positions who may traditionally hold more privilege and power.

Understanding how families and neighborhoods have become a focus of regeneration and community commitment requires an understanding of power and therefore a critical approach: "Things don't just happen to be the way they are; they have been constructed and reconstructed by people within power-laden environments" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p.20). The organization is focused on creating "kid success families and neighborhoods" in a city and state that has systematically failed to support families through public education and basic city services such as water access and adequate emergency services (Pedroni, 2011; Wilson, Bentley, & Kneff-Chang, 2019; Wilson, 2015).

Online data collection and the Covid-19 pandemic

The bulk of this study was planned in the months preceding the Covid-19 pandemic but the strategy for data collection shifted from in-person to online data collection before I applied for IRB in June 2020. Qualitative researchers struggled with this new reality, "given the social

distancing restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the collection [traditional] methods for qualitative data is hampered, and that the accessibility of data source becomes challenging" (Torrentira, 2020, p. 82). As a novice researcher, the pivot to online data collection was difficult in that it was poised to challenge my relationship-building skills which I had practiced in previous research setting by leaning into casual interactions between observations or interviews to build familiarity with people which could lead into interviews and insights. Beside that feeling of not having all the tools I was used to, I also was living through a pandemic with small children, as many others were. At times it felt strange to push forward with a project, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic and in a place like Detroit that had suffered so much loss of life early on.

I connected to the participant on Zoom during the hours and hours of data collection for my study. The organization was using the online platform to host their staff meetings and their literacy programs, so I was able to just enter the space. As mentioned previously, I did my best to request that the facilitator of the meeting or program introduced me, and I quickly asked for permission. If I were in person, I could chat with people as they came in or give a quick hand raise before the session started. But on Zoom, at times, the facilitator would get started and it felt intrusive to interrupt in order to ask the participants for their consent for me to be there observing. By the end of the data collection, some staff seemed genuinely annoyed that I was asking at all of the meetings. Howlett (2021) describes her experience of shifting her own ongoing interviewing into an online format,

> Whereas the power dynamics of researcher–participant interactions in fieldwork are typically 'reciprocal, asymmetrical or exploitative' (England, 1994: 243)—as we purposefully enter the personal lives of our participants but they are less likely to enter

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ours (Knott, 2019)—online methods actually enabled a more symmetrical relationship with my participants. (p.8).

A surprising feature of the digital fieldwork included the way participants entered my world- my bedroom, basement, dining room; they could hear and sometimes see my children who dismissed the "STOP" signs of the few private spaces in my home while I did this data collection. In some ways, that symmetrical relationship built some rapport across spaces and identities, particularly with fellow mothers. Skågeby (2011) suggests that digital interviewing leads to "disclosure of more honest and deep information" (p. 417), it's possible the online interviewing allowed for a more comfortable space (physically and emotionally) for participants to share freely.

As stated in Chapter 1, the research questions that guided this study narrowed on the experiences of various people whose lives are connected to Neighborhood Strong's mission in the pursuit of kid success families and neighborhoods. The questions also explore the organizational systems of the nonprofit in an attempt to understand the structural features, leadership, and culture that underpins the experiences of stakeholders.

1. What is "kid success" according to Neighborhood Strong stakeholders including community members, staff, and leadership? How does literacy fit into this mission?

2. How does each neighborhood hub enact the mission of the organization? How do literacy practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?

3. What organizational culture and structures support or limit the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of "kid success" and literacy?

In the following sections, I will review some of the relevant information related to Neighborhood Strong, methods and data collection, and analysis. Next, I will discuss issues of trustworthiness and subjectivity, and the limitations of the study.

Relevant Neighborhood Strong Information: Sampling and Observation Decisions

In my work as part of a university-based evaluation team for a community collective action project I was introduced to a variety of early literacy partners in Southwest Detroit. In contrast to other partners, including the local school, Neighborhood Strong seemed to have a unique orientation to incorporating the lived experiences of families and community members. As I learned more about them, I found the organizational structure was described first and foremost as being focused on listening to the needs of community members and maintaining flexibility (in everything from scheduling to programming to fundraising) in order to deliver the mission of the organization in the way community members saw fit. Because of my interest in both family engagement and family literacy, this community-focused neighborhood organization was a good fit for my inquiry.

I began my research with a preliminary case study of one neighborhood hub whose participants were mostly Spanish-speaking families, many recent immigrants, with children who are multilingual learners. Later, I expanded the bounds of the research to encompass the organization as a whole and to add one more neighborhood hub to my dissertation study to get a better understanding of how the organizational model functioned in different neighborhood communities. Because my dissertation data collection happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, my interactions with the staff were restricted to virtual encounters where I was often simply present as an observer, limiting some of my ability to connect with and build relationships with staff and community members in informal ways.

I expanded study by presenting my research plans and goals through a short introductory virtual presentation at a global team meeting and later at a manager team meeting. After this introduction, I observed each of these meetings 10-12 times from September-December 2020 (a mix of global and managers) and March-April 2021 (managers meetings).

At the time I began the expanded study in September 2020, there were eight neighborhood sites in operation. I decided that the best way to explore my research questions was to focus on the virtual and physical space of the neighborhood and all its complexities. I selected neighborhood hubs by contacting the Community Engagement Managers (CEM) of the site, most of whom I knew only through observations of virtual Manager meetings which I began attending in September 2020. In choosing the hubs, my goal was to ensure the study represented two African American neighborhood-serving sites and one Latinx site in order to better reflect the demographics of the city. By November 2020, the CEMs at the primarily Latinx-serving Southwest hub, Teodora, and the primarily African American-serving Brightmoor hub, Maxine, agreed to participate. Also in November, I reached out to the Central hub and the CEM said she would like to discuss the opportunity with the neighborhood participants. She emailed back to say that the neighborhood community members were not interested in participating at this time, so she respectfully declined the request.

I did one interview with each of the confirmed CEMs in November 2020. In January and February 2021, I took a break from data collection but remained in email contact. I sent updates on my plans to re-engage with sites in March. In a February email, Maxine from Brightmoor, let me know that she had submitted her resignation from the position. Maxine connected me with the email address of the incoming CEM, a community member who had been hired for the position. After several attempts to communicate via email, the new CEM responded by saying

she did not feel comfortable being a focus site as she was just getting started in the position. This was understandable, but disappointing, and I found myself with one focus hub instead of the three I had planned to highlight.

Beyond hoping for a racially representative sampling of hubs, I was also hoping to have a geographically diverse cross-section of the city. I was hoping to get some representation of the East side, which has its own unique history. During the time I was reaching out to the CEMs, the only hub on the East side that was fully functioning was the Osborn hub. I sent emails to the CEM at Osborn and did not receive a response. Next, I sent an email to Octavia from Dexter-Linwood. She agreed to have the site as a focus of the study with a reciprocity agreement that I would later help to work with her to develop a family literacy program.

There were three sites I did not approach to partner with for various reasons. I did not choose to contact the Cody Rouge CEM because they were new to the organization and the location was close to Brightmoor, the Fitzgerald CEM asked to not be included in my meeting observation notes and therefore I decided not to reach out, and the Springwells hub is another primarily Latinx-serving hub, a minority group in the city, which was already represented through the Southwest hub.

Table 3.2

Summary of neighborhood hub demographics and inquiry into being part of the study

Location *(operating at the time of study)*	Location in city and demographics	Did I contact them to be a focus site/their response
Southwest	Southwest; Latinx	Yes/Yes
Brightmoor	Northwest; African American	Yes/Yes then no because of new staff

Central	Central; African American	Yes/No
Osborn	Eastside; African American	Yes/No response
Dexter-Linwood	Central African American	Yes/Yes
Fitzgerald	Northwest African American	No because they asked not to participate in meeting observations
Cody Rouge	West African American	No because of new staff and location
Springwells	Southwest Latinx	No because of demographics

I had established relationships with the team at the Southwest site and therefore it was my first choice. It is one of the oldest running and largest sites in the organization serving over 600 families. I have long-standing working relationships with their staff as I conducted preliminary research and offered family literacy programs there through a University of Michigan Public Scholarship Grant. Southwest is one of two hubs that serves primarily Latinx families from neighborhoods with a significant Spanish-speaking, immigrant population. The programming is offered in Spanish through their bilingual staff, and it attracts families from outside of the immediate neighborhood because there are few other Spanish language family programs offered in the Metro Detroit area.

Southwest Hub

The Southwest location is both the headquarters for the nonprofit, housed in a convent building in the formerly Polish Catholic neighborhood, and a hub for the surrounding neighborhood. This was the second of the organization's neighborhood hubs, opened in 2016.

Some literacy programs are offered in a bilingual format (Play and Learn) or English (school age tutoring; English as a Second Language). The community has close connections with the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation which serves the larger Detroit community.

Dexter-Linwood Hub

The Dexter-Linwood location is a large two-story brick house slightly northwest of Downtown. This location had been a neighborhood community space before joining the Neighborhood Strong system. The home opened as the Dexter-Linwood hub for families in January 2020 and serves a majority African American population with some White families.

Relevant Neighborhood Strong Information

In the following section, I will overview the context of the study, including the organizational structure, the effect of the ongoing global pandemic, and the nature of literacy programming at neighborhood sites.

Contexts of Study: Organizational Structure and Neighborhood Locations

Neighborhood Strong has three major categories of staff: global staff, manager team, and support team (Figure 3.1). The roles and responsibilities of team members range from planning the program calendars, fundraising, facilities management, stewardship management, community engagement, childcare and a dozen other roles.

Figure 3.1

Neighborhood Strong Flat Organizational Chart

Global Team
Chief Executive Officer
Development Director
Director of Finance
Director of Programming
Health Program Manager
Operations and Special Projects Manager
Senior Community Engagement Manager
Social Media and Brand Ambassador
Stewardship Manager

Site Support
Special Programs
Partnerships
Volunteers

Site Support
Special Programs
Partnerships
Media
Maintenance
Stewardship

Kid Success

Support Team

Community Engagement Coordinator (6)

Facilities Manager and Engagement Coordinator

Child Care Specialist (2)

Manager Team

Community Engagement Manager (8)

Intake and Evaluation Manager

Site Specific Roles

The circles in Figure 3.1 demonstrate how each of the teams should overlap and how all of the staff roles are designed to be interconnected in the mission of "kid success".

The global team operates across the organization as a foundation that creates the general structure from which each of the neighborhood hubs are built. The roles and responsibilities of this team include some roles that are very connected with neighborhood staff (i.e., Senior Community Engagement Manager) and other roles that rarely allow for the staff to interact with the neighborhood staff and/or community members (i.e., Development Director).

The On-going Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Because of the global Coronavirus pandemic, and the Covid-19 stay-at-home order in Michigan, the organization was forced to radically alter their normal operating procedures. The delivery model of most programs shifted to online offerings in May 2020. In the fall of 2020, there were some brief outdoor programs offered in neighborhoods where families indicated they would like to be in-person again. At the same time, some of the neighborhoods partnered with the City of Detroit to create some outdoor, internet-connected community gathering spaces (I did not observe any of these programs as I was not yet working at the neighborhood level). Just as plans were being made to continue programming in person, Michigan suffered an uptick in COVID-19 cases in November 2020 and the in-person programs were again shut down. Detroit Public Schools Community District, which had in-person and virtual options for their community, went completely online again.

Literacy Programs Observed

Neighborhood Strong's literacy platform includes a selection of tutoring programs for elementary-aged students. One local nonprofit, Center for Success, offers one-on-one sessions with a mentor two days a week. This program formerly met in person and each child was matched with a volunteer mentor for one hour, two days a week. Additionally, there is a national nonprofit BookNook which also offers one-on-one online tutoring. Play and Learn sessions are developed by the site managers for preschoolers and their caregivers. As mentioned in Chapter One, language and early literacy-focused classes include the nationally implemented LENA Start program which teaches caregivers with infants and toddlers the importance of speaking to and with their children to develop language. Neighborhood Strong used this model to develop their own play-based curriculum, 313 Speaks- LENA Home, which incorporates hands-on, guided interactions between caregivers and their small children into the existing model of teaching

families the importance of conversation. Other offerings I observed include the national Reading is Fundamental program, Stories and Stem (offered by a local contracted facilitator), and Stories and Play (offered by a local contracted facilitator).

The context of literacy programs in this Covid-19 era is important to understand. I explore how families are engaging with and participating in literacy programming in each neighborhood. The contexts of literacy programs—including how the program is taking place virtually (individually or group formats), with whom (who is facilitating and/or volunteering), and if the program is developed at the neighborhood site or if it is developed through local (i.e., Center for Success) or nonlocal partners (i.e., BookNook)—all add to the complexities of the case.

Sampling

At the organizational (global) level, I began using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2011) to determine which potential participants to contact for interviews. Yin (2011) describes purposeful sampling as, "The selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study's research questions" (p. 311). In sampling from the global team, I looked at the alignment of the responsibilities of the staff given my research questions.

During global meetings I learned about different staff members and their roles at the organization. I used a specific criterion to determine who I reached out to. Merriam (2009) describes this type of sampling, "In criterion-based selection you first decide what attributes of your sample are crucial to your study and then find people or sites that meet those criteria" (p. 97). I emailed staff members who: 1) had been employed for at least three months and 2) their work was related to my research questions (how the organization is structured or education-

focused). An example of someone I did not interview is a global staff member whose role is

overseeing the health-related programs as that did not align with my inquiry. Below is an

overview of the staff interviewed.

Table 3.2

Basic information about participating staff

Staff	Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity/ (Other Identities shared)
Global	Ellen	F	White/ Indigenous
Global	Lindsay	F	White
Global	Zelda	F	White
Global	Harmony	F	Black
Global	Ben	M	White
Global	Abril	F	Latina
Global	Hope	F	Black
Global	Olivia	F	White
Global/ Advisory	Renata	F	Black
Board	Bruce	M	White (Jewish)
Board	Beverly	F	White (Jewish)
Manager	Teodora	F	Latina
Manager	Maxine	F	Black (Christian)
Manager	Octavia	F	Black (Immigrant, Christian)
Coordinator/ Facilitator	Melody	F	Black

Global: 9 Manager: 3 Other: 3		F:13 M: 2 N/B:0	Black: 6 Latina: 2 White: 6 White/Indigenous:1

From the participating hubs, Southwest and Dexter-Linwood, I selected community members to interview from the following criteria: 1) adult caregivers, 2) caregivers of children aged between four and eight years old, and 3) caregivers who had participated in at least one literacy program through the hub. I also was open to the opportunity to interview community members who may not have children in the 0-8 age range, but who acted as a representative for the neighborhood hub on their advisory team.

Due to the virtual environment, it was difficult to solicit families for interviews through the program observations. I used snowball sampling and I relied on the CEMs of the hubs for participant recommendations. I connected with and interviewed four out of the four contacts suggested by Teodora and Abril at Southwest and four of the six contacts suggested by Octavia at Dexter-Linwood.

Table 3.4

Basic information about participating community

Neighborhood	Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Southwest	Veronica	F	Latina
Southwest	Giselle	F	Latina
Southwest	Honora	F	Latina
Southwest	Helena	F	Latina
Dexter-Linwood	Danielle	F	Black
Dexter-Linwood	Drea	F	Black

Dexter-Linwood	Prentice	F	Black
Dexter-Linwood	Monica	F	Black
Southwest: 4 Dexter-Linwood: 4		F: 8 M:0	Latina: 4 Black: 4

I followed a semi-structured interview protocol for each of the staff and community member interviews. In the next sections I will overview the research design process including decision points and methods of data collection used throughout the process.

Methods and Data Collection

I began to design this study in January 2020, and I later received permission from the CEO, Ellen, that I would have access to the organization for this project. I began the IRB process in June and was approved on July 31, 2020.

After IRB approval, I shared informational materials for the study and the CEO shared them at the various staff team meetings to get feedback and have an open dialogue about the study without my presence. After the initial in-house feedback, she invited me to present at the global team meeting where I introduced my study to staff members at their weekly meetings and was available for any questions.

Data collection began in September 2020 and ended in September 2021. See Table X below for a timeline including the major categories of data collection. Not listed on this timeline are one-time observations such as the annual fundraiser (October 2020) and a hub-specific listening session (November 2021).

The first portion of data collection (Fall 2020) focused on the organizational structures and systems. The next phase of data collection (Spring-Summer 2021) was focused on the neighborhood sites and how they take up the mission of the organization.

Table X: Timeline of data collection

Global and Manager Meeting Observations

After this introduction, I began my data collection at the global level. This first phase of data collection included observing several weekly Global and Manager team meetings between September and December. Through these observations I was introduced to staff members, and I reached out to some individuals via email to invite them to a preliminary interview. Each observation I would remind everyone that I was observing for a research study and ask for their consent. In the Manager meetings there was a CEM who consistently told me "You do not have my consent to include me in your notes".

During fall 2020, I observed the annual fundraiser (online) and attended one virtual listening session for the Brightmoor site. After being present during the Manager's meetings, I initiated the process of reaching out to the managers of specific sites to invite their community to be a focus of the next phase of data collection. The managers of Brightmoor and Southwest both agreed, and I did initial interviews with each manager in November.

In early January I asked the CEO to connect me via email with some of the board members. I interviewed the co-founders and an advisory board member. When I re-engaged with the neighborhood sites in February, I was disappointed to hear the Brightmoor CEM was leaving. She graciously allowed me to follow up with a second interview in March after her departure from the position. In late April, I confirmed with Octavia that Dexter-Linwood would be a focus site. At this point, it was clear through observations at manager meetings that many of the CEMs were overwhelmed and I was having a difficult time getting responses to my communications.

I made a flier with my photo, a description of my research study, and my contact information in Spanish (at SW site) and English (for Dexter-Linwood). Study participants from

the Neighborhood Strong staff who volunteered to be interviewed were not offered compensation, but community members were given $25 gift cards. The CEO said about the employees participating in an interview, "it is just part of what we do" (personal communication, March 3, 2019).

Program Observations

Using the neighborhood programming calendar, I identified the literacy-focused programs at each hub, tried to reach out to the facilitators (often, I needed the support of the CEM for contact information), shared the information about my study, and asked if I may observe some of the programs. I conducted literacy program observations at the Southwest and Dexter-Linwood sites from March into June 2021. These observations were at times difficult to access depending on how easy or difficult it was to contact the person who was facilitating.

In these literacy program observations, when the virtual facilitator introduced me, I shared my study information, asked for consent to observe from all participants, and invited community members to participate in a one-time interview to share their experiences from participating in the Neighborhood Strong community. There were times when the facilitator would not introduce me, and I would directly message them and ask them to pause and allow me to explain who I was and make sure that all participants (or their caregivers if it was children) consented to me being there observing and taking notes. I waited to take notes until I had that confirmation in all sessions. All participants consented during every program I observed, but no community members from any programs I observed responded to my general request to interview them.

I included a small sampling from the leadership and oversight of the organization. I included a small sampling from these categories while maintaining the focus on the experiences

of the staff and participating families. Included were the two co-founders and board members and an advisory board member who is also a part-time global team employee.

Data collection

This case study was grounded in qualitative methods including observation and field notes, collection of artifacts, and semi-structured interviews. All data collection was conducted online (Skågeby, 2011). The neighborhood hubs I was focused on were not reopened during the March-June literacy program observations and all organizational meetings remained virtual. Most observations and interviews were conducted through the Zoom online meeting platform. A handful of interviews were phone calls per the request of the participant.

Observations

The first source of data collection I used was observation. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) describe observation as, "a central and fundamental method in qualitative inquiry" (p.194) and a method that allows the researcher to obtain "a firsthand account of the phenomenon of interest rather than relying on someone else's interpretation or perspective" (p.195). The first observations were with the global and manager team meetings. At the beginning of each meeting, I re-introduced myself and explained that I would observe and take notes. I asked for visual (thumbs up), verbal, or written consent (in the Zoom chat box). I asked participants to please let me know if they did not want me to take notes on their participation. During the managers meeting, there was one manager who consistently asked me via direct chat message to exclude them from my notes.

When observing the hub-specific literacy programs, I first had to contact the facilitator of the program. Sometimes these were staff members but often they were partners and contracted facilitators from outside of the organization. I introduced myself and my study via email and

asked for permission to observe. If they granted permission, I then asked for them to share my information with participants. If this was not possible, I asked for a quick minute at the beginning of the program to introduce myself and ask for visual, verbal, or written consent from participants. If the participants were children, like in the tutoring programs, I asked for consent from a nearby adult.

Because this was in Zoom format, this sometimes felt disruptive to the program. This felt like one of the more intrusive and trickier parts of my study. Because Zoom classes allowed people to always enter and exit the meeting and often families had their video turned off. I had to interrupt more often to confirm that I had consent from participants than if we were together in person. Other times, if the facilitator just started without acknowledging my presence and asking for consent from participants for me to observe, I sent them a private chat message and they could stop to pause and check with participants.

I used pre-developed observation protocols (one for staff meetings and one for literacy programs) to focus my attention and my field notes on the interactions and themes of the meetings that would allow me to answer my research questions. After virtual observations, I digitally stored my field notes.

Artifacts

During observations I collected artifacts including documents that were shared during meetings and literacy programs, screenshots of interactive meeting notes and visuals, literacy program activities and instructional screens. Additionally, I captured screenshots of portions of the website as well as the social media posts of the organization and those of the focus neighborhood hubs. Other artifacts include organizational documents shared with me throughout the period of data collection (i.e., programming guide, volunteer PowerPoint, etc.). Artifacts

were collected throughout the process and digitally stored according to the categories listed in the table above.

Interviews

Interviews were based on semi-structured interview protocols which positioned me to explore different stakeholder perspectives on kid success, their own understanding of the organization, and their role within it. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) describe the benefit of interviews as a method of data collection, "they offer the potential to capture a person's perspective of an event or experience" (p.193) The interviews were designed so there was room for participants to expand on their identities, perspectives, histories, sense of community, and while also relating to Neighborhood Strong's organizational mission.

I initiated contact with staff, board members, and partner interview participants by sending an email indicating my interest in interviewing them and asking for their availability. Most of the staff returned my email and we identified a time to meet. For staff, I scheduled a 45–60-minute time slot and sent a Zoom invitation and the Informed Consent form for them to read before we began the interview. For community member interviews, I introduced myself and my study, explained their contact information had been shared with me by the neighborhood staff, and asked if they would be interested in participating in a 30-minute interview. I also included that there would be a $25 gift card to serve as reciprocity for their time and sharing of experiences. Staff and other stakeholder interviews usually lasted between 45-60 minutes (up to two interviews) and community participant interviews lasted around 30 minutes (one interview).

Interviews with global staff began in September 2020-January 2021 and resumed March-June, 2021 and final interviews with community members occurred in August-September 2021.

Data Analysis

With 30 hours of interview data, 51 hours of observation data, and dozens of artifacts the data analysis was key to developing themes across sources. I began initial data analysis as I cleaned and processed the raw data. Transcripts, field notes, analytical memos, and artifacts were uploaded into ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software. I reviewed my data throughout the cleaning process. I used "jottings" (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013) to capture any quick thoughts that emerge, making sure to be cautious to avoid moving into analysis mode.

The analysis began with "first cycle" descriptive coding of interview transcripts using descriptive and in vivo coding. In vivo coding "uses short words or phrases from the participants' own language in the data record" (Miles et al., 2013, p. 74). This type of coding allowed me to stay true to the language of participants, which included terms that were specific to the organizational culture or systems, like "wish upon a star", the name of a hub-based intake assessment that appeared six times in the analysis. Descriptive coding also allowed me to capture the ways in which interviewees described the mission of the organization ("success", "community needs"), the importance of literacy ("tutoring", "literacy"), and their experiences as participants or staff (Miles et al., 2013). Next, I added thematic codes to the codebook, including codes that described a theme across the data (i.e. capacity).

Table 3.5

Examples of code types with sample data

Type of Code	Code	Example Quote
Descriptive	**Capacity** *The notion of staff or space capacity allowing for, changing, or limiting program offerings, engagement, or outreach*	"Since we have such a large population at Southwest and we have families who keep coming, they have a desire to keep learning and knowing more and more and more. And I know we have resources and partners

		that help with that stuff, but there are times where we run out of facilitators and it's hard to translate, especially at home"
Thematic/Analytical	**Hope** *Related to community member hopes/dreams or discussion of kids and their role in the future of neighborhoods/families*	"And sometimes when you think about the systems that are built around them, either they're there to enhance them and to make them better, or they're there to trap them, and to provide barriers for them, or to make sure that they become a part of the system. And we want to create environments where they know that there's more than that that can take place. Even though around them, we can plant more good around them than bad, and that they have options. And so I think with imparting that within the kids, then they'll grow up to impart that, and it'll be generations, and so then that's when we can change the trajectory of communities"
Theoretical	**Servant Leadership-Organizational Culture** *Staff and leadership dispositions, norms, values, structures, and systems that create a common experience of the organization*	"The idea is that we have a set of training or possibilities that are offered that are personal development, professional development and job specific development, there's three tracks…there are things offered all the time because we're a learning organization and we all want to grow.

The analysis includes an effort to ensure manager and global staff member-checking

through follow-up interviews, which will happen after data collection has ended.

Issues of Trustworthiness: Ensuring Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability, & Transferability

Triangulation of data has long been seen as a reliable way to achieve validity in

qualitative research. Coupled with member-checking, these methods require the researcher to

get confirmation from participants that the data they collected was accurate and also opportunities to check and recheck data points from various angles in triangulation. (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 322-323) As a critical researcher, my goal is to be a trustworthy and credible manager, analyst, and evaluator of the data. My focus, in terms of validity, will be my own reflection and subjectivity throughout the process. Cho and Trent (2006) discuss this type of constant reflection, "validity becomes ever present and recursive as opposed to either a 'step' in a linear sequence or an over-reliance on subjectivity" (p. 328). Although I planned to member check the findings, I was not able to include member checking due to the time and capacity restrictions of my timeline as well as the capacity restrictions of the nonprofit staff.

Researcher positionality and subjectivity

I was first introduced to Ellen, the CEO, in January 2017 through my work as part of a program evaluation team for Poverty Solutions, a University of Michigan presidential initiative. Since that time, I continued to work with the evaluation team as a literacy consultant for two reading-focused initiatives that involve Neighborhood Strong: a school-community collective action project; and the Detroit chapter of the National Grade Level Reading Campaign, which focuses on early literacy, school attendance, and summer learning.

Through my various interactions with the organization, including visiting some family literacy programs in action, I was impressed with the sense of community and the family-like atmosphere at the Southwest location. I continued to build relationships with leadership and staff. In December 2018, I pitched an idea for a Rackham Public Scholarship Grant to one of the global team members (who left the organization in 2019) and we successfully co-wrote the grant application that was selected in 2019. I wrote and co-facilitated a family literacy class for parents of English Learners in early elementary school.

This ongoing work allowed me to further develop connections not just with the staff but with staff from partner programs that operate at the site, such as Center for Success and Wayne METRO. In winter of 2019, I studied the role of family engagement around family literacy at the Southwest hub. This study led me to expand my inquiry to a broader view of the organization.

I entered into and continue this work with my various identities. As I leave Ann Arbor and drive to the city of Detroit as a White woman and graduate student from the University of Michigan, I bring with me the privileges of my whiteness and my high levels of education from an elite institute. University of Michigan researchers in general, and White researchers, have earned high levels of skepticism with some community organizations and community members in the city. A UM professor reflected on a comment from a colleague at Wayne State saying, "you come from the University of Michigan, home of drive-by research" (Cotera, 2012). I understand that with my block M (U-M's logo) comes both privilege and the responsibility to do community-based work with integrity.

Over the years, as I have worked with Neighborhood Strong in various capacities, I have built and maintained relationships with many global staff members as well as the neighborhood level staff and community members at the Southwest site. Through these relationships I have been able to share more of my identities: a teacher who advocates for families and students who are learning English, a mother of young children, a language learner, someone whose family and Irish American roots are one generation removed from Detroit. As I sought to explore other, less familiar, neighborhood sites, I recognized that many of my identities would be unseen and my more salient identities as a White woman from UM would become the most visible.

At all points during data collection, I attempted to stay aware of how my own power was at play. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2010) remind researchers, "One of the central issues to examine

in this discussion of the interpretation of findings is the extent to which power differences between the researcher and researched impact the research findings and the researcher's assessment of what they mean" (p. 316). It was very important that I maintained a reflexive stance, through observation and interview reflective notes, documenting this process in a journal, and maintaining a vigilance of my own self in the work.

My ongoing relationships and fondness for the people and the work that is done at the organization was important to acknowledge and keep in the forefront of my mind as I entered the space for this study. It was through these ongoing relationships and my interest in the family engagement and literacy programs that the organization brought to the community that led me to this work. As Pekshin (1994) said,

> Subjectivity operates throughout the entire research process, beginning with the choice of what we study, including our methods for data collecting and our analysis of data, and ending with the conclusions we draw…Your stake [in your research project] tells me what you care about, possibly how much you care. Caring, I maintain, is the normal behavior of normal people when they conduct research in the field of education, the humanities, and behavioral sciences (p. 50).

With Peshkin's notions of subjectivity in mind, I was attracted to this case because of what I care about: literacy, families engaged in education, community-focused spaces. The case was in alignment with my values which had developed through my years as an elementary teacher, my developing understanding of the need for community while parenting, and the ongoing importance of family (and the sense of belonging family has brought to my life). To highlight one of the above values, during the development of this study I was a parent of young children, and I was navigating the seemingly impossible parenting lifestyle during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In my years of parenting, I recognized the invaluable resources I have: a partner and co-parent who was very involved in all aspects of child rearing and local family members who were able to support our family with childcare and other acts of care such as making meals and gifting my children things they need. My own experiences of parenting during a pandemic made me more sensitive to the realities of those staff and community members who were juggling many of the same things I was.

> Researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity; better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research; and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal (Berger, 2015, p. 220).

Maintaining the difference between the personal and the universal was important throughout the process.

Subjective "I"s in the study

Peshkin (1988) reflected on how he found what he calls his the "subjective Is" in research,

> I looked for the warm and the cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative experiences, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs (p.18)

As I collected data, I checked in on the warm and cool spots. To borrow Peshkin's (1988) phrasing, I found a few salient subjectivities: the *Pandemic Parenting I,* the *Wealth Wary I*, and the *Non Researcher I.*

Parenting, for me, has been one of the most humbling experiences of my life and this role has continued to shape my own positionality and evolve my expectations for how families should be supported by their communities, schools, and larger society. When I think back to my own

expectations of parents and caregivers of my students when I was a non-parent teacher in schools serving predominantly low-income, immigrant families, I am shocked at how narrow my understanding of parents' roles were. My own evolution into the role of mother has expanded my capacity to understand more fully the multiple roles of parents as well as the multiple ways that families are disregarded in our society. The lack of parental leave, childcare options, and early education options created a challenging situation for parents in pre-pandemic times. During the ongoing pandemic, parents and caregivers were continually grappling with difficult choices including sending children to school during outbreaks, navigating school closures, family illness and quarantines with the stress of attempting to maintain jobs that brought important income but also risk of exposure to the Covid-19 virus. The awareness of my own *Pandemic Parenting I* reminded me that some of the "warm" spots I was noticing had to do with my own positionality and struggles. My awareness of my privilege as a parent in a pandemic (health of my family members, ability to work from home, shared workload with partner, stable income and ability to meet our needs, extended family supports, etc.) meant that my understanding of pandemic parenting was also not the same as that of some of the staff and community members I was interacting with. I used this awareness to caution inserting my own experiences into that of my participants, though it was often a way that we began interacting with each other when we began interviews.

A "cool" spot that arose during this study was when there were discussions about money, particularly around the role of wealth and wealthy individuals in the work of the organization and in the literature I reviewed. I, like Ellen, am the daughter of a mailman. My father is a veteran and retired mail carrier who grew up in Detroit. His (my) Irish American family left their Detroit home and moved to a suburb in 1969. My mother worked for an airline for over 25 years

and the pressure on the industry during the Covid-19 pandemic forced her into early retirement. She had already lost her pension when the airline went bankrupt after the September 11, 2001, attacks, yet the company's CEO continued to make millions of dollars. This parallels the kind of wealth disparity between workers and CEOs during the pandemic. I am a first-generation college student and will be the first in my large extended family to earn a terminal degree.

My years of experience teaching in Michigan and Texas, as well as my studies have shown me that the American ideals of meritocracy and individualism are misleading and destructive to the pursuit of collective action. As I have learned to see historical and inequitable systems (not people) at play, I have become very wary of wealth. Under every layer of wealth there are unjust systems implicated in their existence. In the United States, chattel slavery and the exploitation of enslaved people created the conditions for enriching our country as well as individuals whose wealth has carried on for generations. This created an ongoing legacy of a wealth gap in the United States. In a report about closing the wealth gap, the authors say, "Black households constitute less than 2 percent of those in the top one percent of the nation's wealth distribution; white households constitute more than 96 percent of the wealthiest Americans" (Darity Jr, Hamilton, Paul, Aja, Price, Moore, & Chiopris, 2018).

During data collection and analysis, I found myself uncomfortable with the power and influence that capital brings to educational spaces, seemingly without a lot of proximity to any of the real issues or problems that people "on the ground" in education experience (teachers, administrators, families, etc.). I felt my *Wealth Wary I* came through during my study when the data was related to the role of philanthropy in this organization and the physical and experiential disconnect between decision makers and neighborhood community members. It's a tension I continue to grapple with; recognizing that there are ways to, as author Edgar Villanueva

describes, "decolonize wealth" or heal the injustices in society through indigenous wisdom and using money as our medicine (Villanueva, 2021). Because I was able to notice this subjectivity, I was able to keep an awareness of the moments of wariness and bias in places where I needed to listen and understand information about wealth.

The culture of the organization, which I will describe in Chapter 6, is welcoming and friendly. Even in Zoom observations people always attempted to include me in the icebreakers at the beginning of meetings and the dancing during literacy programs. Because the culture is inclusive and warm, I did feel the emergence of positive feelings in some of the interactions as I got reacquainted with a staff member I hadn't seen in a while at the beginning of an interview, or I watched the joyful exchanges between facilitators and children. In those moments, I noticed that I sometimes struggled with maintaining the role of researcher, my *Non-Researcher I* came through. I wanted to share what I was looking forward to for the weekend or shower the facilitator with praises for how they were supporting the student in their literacy lesson. I wanted to be the other parts of me that I am: outgoing and friendly relationship builder, a parent, a teacher, a teacher, a teacher educator. Because of the pandemic, every aspect of my life was happening online, and my data collection was a place where I was connecting with other people the most. Most of the time, it was enjoyable and rewarding to be observing something beyond the normal day-to-day experiences of the pandemic. It was a universally challenging time and I think everyone valued connecting beyond the interview questions. When Maxine started our interview with, "are you protecting your peace, Maggie?", it was difficult to stay in my research role. I wonder how the pandemic affected other researchers and participants in this way? The desire to connect more deeply with others during a collective hardship was present throughout the data collection process.

Throughout the engagement, I committed to having warm relationships and meaningful connections with staff and participants as while I brought my critical awareness by asking questions that explore how societal inequities may play out in this organization in ways I may not have recognized before. Throughout staff interviews, it seemed like people enjoyed the opportunity to think critically and give voice to some of the tensions present in the work of the organization; many of which included tensions related to differing identities (i.e., race, education level) and how these identities influence specific roles, and therefore power, in the organization. I explored and expanded on the tensions and contradictions of hyper-local work in which stakeholders have different perspectives and perceptions of their power.

Chapter 4: The Southwest Hub

This study explores how various stakeholders involved in a neighborhood-based nonprofit attempted to enact the mission of "building kid success families and neighborhoods where families with children 0-8 have what they need to be school ready, healthy and stable" (Neighborhood Strong website).

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from 35 semi-structured interviews, 44 observations (including global and managers meetings, listening sessions, and literacy programs), and dozens of artifacts. Somewhat ironically, the physical neighborhood spaces that were an attractive and unique feature of the planned case study were essentially shuttered as the organization worked in almost-exclusively virtual environments due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. During the time I collected data between September 2020 and September 2021, some sites had opened for outdoor programming, but most remained closed with participants only coming to the site for the weekly distribution day. In the first half of this chapter, I begin with a closeup of the neighborhood sites in which I highlight voices of the community members and neighborhood staff in regard to "kid success." Using data collected from staff and community member interviews, observation, and artifacts, I discuss findings related to how the neighborhood hub enacts the mission and engages families. I also explore how literacy programs are viewed and experienced within that neighborhood. In Chapter 5, I describe the system that oversees, or undergirds, the neighborhood sites.

Drawing from interviews with global team staff, executive board members, and partners, I highlight these diverse voices and how they describe "kid success," which of their identities are salient in the work they are doing, and how they support the neighborhood sites within their roles. Artifacts, including organizational documents, and global meeting observations create a basis for exploring the structures and culture of the organization.

The findings of this qualitative case study begin to describe some of the features of a holistic community-focused nonprofit, including the dispositions of staff that help influence the organization's culture, the structure and systems of engaging families, and the motivations of the participating families.

Part 1: The Pursuit of Kid Success in Two Neighborhoods

The neighborhood hubs are community spaces (physical and virtual) where staff interact with community members and enact the mission of the organization. The community-focused work of the organization happens in these neighborhood spaces, led by the community engagement staff. In this section of the chapter, I will focus on findings from the two focal neighborhoods: Southwest and Dexter-Linwood. These findings will answer the first and second research questions:

1. What is "kid success" according to Neighborhood Strong stakeholders including community members, staff, and leadership? How does literacy fit into this mission?

2. How does each neighborhood hub enact the mission of the organization? How do literacy practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?

In the following sections, I will describe the context of the neighborhood, the hub, and the leadership of the site, the Community Engagement Managers.

First, I briefly introduce two dynamic Community Engagement Managers from the Southwest and the Dexter-Linwood neighborhoods: Teodora and Octavia. In order to understand the many responsibilities of the role, I share how they described the role and responsibilities of their position. Broadly speaking, they are responsible for keeping up with the physical hub which they both refer to as "running" the house, knowing and engaging the community with outreach, creating program opportunities, and engaging with partners and other resources. The Community Engagement Managers act as leaders of their neighborhood hub and supervisors for any other neighborhood staff. Therefore, they hold the responsibilities of the physical space as well as ensuring they have programs and the relationships to engage the target families. Teodora highlights these responsibilities as she reflected on her role and how it changed over time:

> The role and responsibilities of my position would be leading in community engagement. We would be in charge of running a house. Knowing the community, understanding how the community is, finding the resources, knowing the resources available for families so we can offer them, and then facilitation slowly came into play afterwards, but most of it was kind of laying the groundwork of the calendar building, building relationship partners, getting the programming in place on the calendar. Slowly it started off with one class, two classes we were offering... Then slowly Ellen (Neighborhood Strong founder) kept bringing in partners and more partners and more offerings for our families, so we started from offering one or two programs a week–one actually– one program a week, to roughly now we offer, I want to say like 10-15 different programs within a week.
>
> (Teodora interview, November 12, 2020)

Teodora's role has grown as her hub has grown.

Octavia names the multiple, sometimes competing, responsibilities of her role and how they have changed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic:

> As the Community Engagement Manager, our role is so many. We are in charge of the day-to-day running of the house, the operations of the house. But at the same time we also have that connecting with the community–the outreach aspect. The outreach and engagement aspect of it. Finding partners around the community that we can engage with. So as the Community Engagement Manager, you are doing a lot of stuff in the house, the programming, but you also do a lot of outreach effort to get the people, to know about the programming and for them to come and attend the programming, so the work of the Community Engagement Manager, it's a lot. With us going virtual now, the technical skill, you just have to be on top of your game in that aspect also. That aspect of community engagement, being on Zoom, being virtual, that aspect has brought some change. Having to learn a lot of new skill sets and facilitating in a totally different manner. In person and virtual is very different. (Octavia interview, April 29, 2021)

In the following sections I will focus on one neighborhood at a time. Zooming out from the big picture of the neighborhood within the city— across time— and in on the Neighborhood Strong hub located in that neighborhood. I will also more fully introduce Teodora and Octavia in order to explore who they are, what motivates them to be leaders at this organization, and how that influences the pursuit of the kid success mission at their hub.

Southwest Detroit

Southwest Detroit is a large swath of the city that incorporates several distinct neighborhoods. This section of the city, a couple miles from Downtown, has historically been home to immigrant populations that developed the neighborhoods, restaurants, and other

attractions. In neighborhoods like Corktown, their legacies still stand, including the 100-year-old Gaelic League Irish American club and the 80-year-old Maltese American club. Nearby Mexicantown, named for the Mexican immigrants who began to call the city home as early as the 1920s, boasts population density and a vibrant assortment of businesses and a wide variety of restaurants focused on authentic Mexican, Salvadorian, Puerto Rican, and Italian cuisine. The Southwest hub resides in the Chadsey-Condon neighborhood of Southwest Detroit. The neighborhood expanded from immigration in the 1920s and residents were predominantly immigrants from Poland, Eastern Europe, and southern Appalachia coming for the auto industry labor boom. More recently, there has been an influx of Mexican and Central American immigrants to the area, expanding southward from the traditional Mexicantown neighborhood. Yemini immigrants from the long-established Arab American population in nearby Dearborn have newly arrived the western portion of the neighborhood. While Chadsey-Condon has higher rates of home ownership and income, it has some of the lowest rates of education in the city (Data Driven Detroit, 2013; Malloch & Tobocman, 2021).

Southwest Hub

This building is physically the largest of all the Neighborhood Strong hubs, and the only one that is not a single-family home. It occupies the ground floor and basement of a large brick building that used to be part of a Catholic school compound at the heart of the Polish community. The former school building across the parking lot has been used as a Head Start. On the other side, the former church building, a unique A-frame featuring stained-glass, was demolished in June 2021, leaving a large grassy lawn on the other side of the small parking lot, and displacing a cultural monument to the Polish Catholic community who used to live there.

Figure 4.1

A photograph of St. Andrews Parish in 2010

Note: Photograph from St. Andrews Catholic Church advertisement for its 90th Anniversary,

November 28, 2010; the original building was built "in a record 15 and half working days"

(West Side Polish American Historical Society)

Figure 4

A person looking at the remains of St. Andrews Catholic Church after demolition, June 15, 2021

(Detroit News)

Upstairs, the former bedrooms for the nuns living in the convent were repurposed as offices for the Global Neighborhood Strong team and various partners who run programs in the space. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, this site was buzzing with activity every weekday. There were full days of education, health, and parenting programs as well as all-day childcare for children who weren't yet school-aged. The staff prepared home-cooked breakfast and lunches for families in the large kitchen that had been designed for feeding a crowd. The space also served as a location for organization-level professional development and meetings. Volunteers gathered there to put together food baskets for Thanksgiving and cut out the laminated pieces to literacy games for reading tutoring. Staff has returned to host virtual events and prepare the weekly distribution of materials needed for programs, food, diapers, and other necessities.

It was a sunny November afternoon when I first sat down to interview Teodora on Zoom. She was in her office chair in a pristine living room decorated in striking deep blues and modern white furniture. We spent a few minutes catching up from the last time we'd seen each other. Teodora and I have worked together in various ways over the last several years, most recently by co-facilitating a family literacy workshop for the participants at the Southwest hub in her role as Community Engagement Manager.

After a few minutes of chatting, we began our interview. She was mid-sentence when I heard the background noise rising. Multiple voices began to interrupt her train of thought. Her face expressed her frustration but the spotless living room behind her remained untouched. "I wish I could mute them. Mute!" she joked as she gestured to the space behind her where her own four young children were encroaching in her office space. She had now been home with them for eight months, sheltering from the waves of Covid-19 infections in a city that had suffered some of the most devastating early losses of the pandemic in the United States. As they clambered into

her space, behind her chair, and onto her lap, various body parts began to poke through the magazine-perfect living room Zoom backdrop. The green screen facade that had created the illusion of a work/home balance was short-lived. She shooed them all out of the room but kept the almost-one-year-old, who had spent half of her life in COVID-19 quarantine. As the noise receded into the background once again, Teodora told me she was going to briefly turn off her video to nurse her youngest child while we continued our interview.

Teodora's role, Community Engagement Manager, is one that she has held since 2016. Neighborhood Strong took over the building from another community-based organization who had been providing early childhood education but had lost their funding. She recalled Ellen coming to check out the space and do focus groups with the families that had been participating in the programs. Ellen recruited Teodora as a parent facilitator and when the position for Community Engagement Manager became vacant, she took the lead role at the hub and has been working in the role ever since.

Teodora leads the largest neighborhood-based team of coordinators, facilitators, and childcare workers. In pre-pandemic times, the tight-knit team cooked, cleaned, took care of babies and small children, translated for programs, and contacted participants to support outside facilitators with communication. This group of four Latina women continues to keep everyone connected, despite the many changes in their day-to-day tasks.

As of September 2021, participation at this site has remained virtual; the Southwest community has voiced repeatedly that they have not felt comfortable getting back together in person since March 2020 (notes from Managers meeting, September 1, 2020, and interview, November 13, 2020). Despite the shift from a bustling community space to the small squares in a Zoom room, Teodora reported that participation grew during this time of virtual programming.

The database for the entire Neighborhood Strong network reportedly has 4,290 individuals (not families) who have been to at least one program (Teodora interview, June 9, 2021). Out of that total, the Southwest hub represents almost half, with 1,290 participants. These individuals almost exclusively identify as Latino/a or Hispanic, Spanish-speaking or bilingual Spanish/English, and include a significant immigrant population. Reflecting on how her site has such a large portion of participants across the city, Teodora connected the participation to the immigrant community, saying:

> So, I am guessing that immigrants are always looking for better opportunities for their families, so there is always a larger percentage of participation. I don't know if we can prove it statistically or whatnot, I wonder about that. But I want to say it has to be the immigrant community that are mostly looking for better opportunities for their children.
>
> (Teodora interview, June 9, 2021)

Teodora's hunch about the importance of education in immigrant families is supported by the research (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005)

Interestingly, despite the intention of the place-focused, neighborhood-centric model, this particular hub has drawn families from all over the Detroit metropolitan region, even in pre-pandemic times. Even Teodora was surprised that there has even been a family participating from Canada through virtual sessions.

Teodora is a US-born, second generation Mexican American. In her definition of kid success, she refers to supporting mothers, accessing resources, and the role of the community in preparing a child for school:

> I think it truly, it all boils down to that child being ready in all aspects to learn… Pretty much it's kind of like helping a mother connect more to her community and have more

connections and resources to help build her child up before the child even starts school to have that child be ready and open to that learning so that child is secure and healthy in all aspects, and is open to learning… But it has everything to do with the entire community, as well as the mother and having the resources she needs. (Teodora interview, November 13, 2020)

Teodora's role in the organization is to engage with families, connect families to each other, and supply resources such as programs or connections to external resources. Connecting kid success directly to a mother having access to resources, early and often, offers a holistic approach to education.

In order to understand more family engagement and participation at this Southwest hub, I interviewed four community members, all mothers, who had children ranging from ages 2-13. I found that across this sampling of parents, Teodora's instincts about the motivations of the immigrant community were correct. Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on continuing to learn as mothers, feeling like they and their children are loved and cared for, having a support network of other mothers, and creating opportunities for their children to grow.

Community Member Experiences

Each of the women below (all names are pseudonyms) came to be involved with the Southwest site through a personal or professional connection. The following chart gives some basic information and there is a more detailed overview of their interviews below.

Table 4.1

Basic information about Southwest study participants

Name (Language of interview)	(Number of children) Age of children	How they found Neighborhood Strong	How long they have been involved	Where they currently live

Veronica (English)	(2) 4.5 & 2.5	The pediatrician referred her to BD's LENA Start program due to language development delays	2 years	Detroit: Springwells neighborhood (There is another BD hub there, but she attends Southwest)
Giselle (Spanish)	(2) 8 & 8	She met a Neighborhood Strong staff member doing outreach at the Mexican consulate	5 years	Nearby suburb West of the city; former Detroit resident
Helena (Spanish)	(4) 13, 12, 6, & 3	A neighbor invited her to a program	5 years	Detroit; Southwest neighborhood
Honoria (Spanish)	(3) 12, 10, & 7	Her sister-in-law invited her to a program	5 years	Nearby suburb "downriver" Southwest of the city; former Detroit resident

Veronica is a young bilingual mom with two children under five. She considers herself a Detroiter, noting that she's lived here for 10 years after immigrating from Mexico when she was a teenager. After she had her first child, she was concerned that the toddler was almost three and nonverbal. Her daughter's pediatrician referred her to a language development program (LENA Start) for caregivers and their babies or toddlers which was being offered in partnership with Neighborhood Strong. A facilitator at another program, infant massage, listened to her concerns about her daughter's development and connected her to a local kids' mental health organization. There, they advocated for her to connect with professionals who helped her get an autism diagnosis for her daughter. Her child then began Applied Behavioral Autism (ABA) therapy. In our interview, she told me about how much socioemotional and behavioral growth her daughter

experienced while attending programming and childcare at the Southwest site, "she used to play by herself and now she's interacting with other kids." With the support of a caring and patient childcare staff, Veronica was able to integrate her daughter with special needs into the community. Her second child, only two years younger, has similar early developmental delays and he is not yet talking at 2.5 years. Because she already knew how to access the correct resources, her son is also receiving one-on-one ABA therapy and Veronica is hopeful he will be able to attend the same programs his sister did at Neighborhood Strong.

Giselle is a mother of 8-year-old twin boys who is quick to laugh. She and her husband are from Mexico City, Mexico and have been in the United States for many years on her husband's work visa. She considers herself a Detroiter, even though she lives about 25 minutes away in a nearby suburb. Her husband works in the city and in pre-pandemic times, the whole family traveled to the city almost every weekend and she frequently brought her boys to the Southwest hub for programs, childcare, enrichment activities, and the Spanish language. "*La verdad es que a mi me encantaba ir, porque conocía gente, mis hijos tambien conocian mas gente que hablara su idioma, porque a ellos como les encanta hablar espanol*/The truth is that I loved to go, because I got to meet people, my children also met more people who spoke their language, because they love to speak Spanish." The boys had been resistant to the English language programs in other places and specifically loved how everyone spoke Spanish with them at the hub. In our interview she shared how much that had changed during the pandemic when they each did virtual reading tutoring and formed a special bond with their tutors. English was no longer a battle in their house, and they became motivated readers. Additionally, when the Covid pandemic began, her husband began to work from home. It was a relief to have him safe, but it

was stressful having everyone together. They signed up for adult-focused programs at the hub to support them during that transition.

Helena was introduced to the Southwest hub when a neighbor invited her to an adult cooking and nutrition class in 2016. She has lived in Detroit for five years, calling the Southwest neighborhood home. Helena met all her closest friends at the hub, she explained, "*Es una comunidad muy bonita, de hecho, mi círculo de amistades actualmente, todas mis amigas las conocí en Neighborhood Strong/*It's a very beautiful community, in fact, my circle of friends right now, all of my friends I met at Neighborhood Strong". She is the only one of the four women I interviewed that lives in the neighborhood of the hub she attends. Helena named a catalog of programs she had attended: anger management, stress management, a mom's club where they got together and did walks with their children, and play groups led by staff. Her children have participated in summer programs, tutoring, and the youngest one was currently taking *ballet folklórico* (a traditional Mexican dance class). She misses the experience of being together, in person, but is grateful for the virtual opportunities to remain in contact with the community.

Honoria found Neighborhood Strong through her sister-in-law's recommendation. She says she believes a mother's job is to find information and to be constantly learning new things. She reflected about growing up in Mexico, and how she wants to do things differently from her parents who didn't have the same information that parents have now. She hopes to learn more and collaborate more with her children so they can have a better life than she has had. Neighborhood Strong has been a place for her to pursue these goals. She has taken so many classes she can't remember what they are all called, some of them more than once, she says she learns something new each time. Despite living in a suburb about 25 minutes away, she has been

involved in many programs over several years. She says, "*Porque en Detroit siempre hay muchísimas oportunidades y yo digo que hay muchas personas que no lo aprovechan, hay que aprovechar lo que haya/*because in Detroit there are always so many opportunities and there are so many people who don't take advantage, you have to take advantage of what there is". Her children are older, her youngest is 7, close to aging out of the target age range for Neighborhood Strong's mission. In our interview she talks about how she wishes there were more programs for older children. Honoria spoke of the feelings of love and care that she and her children have felt in the Neighborhood Strong space, both physically and virtually.

These four women each shared a thirty-minute interview with me. During these semi-structured interviews, I asked them to reflect on their experiences at Neighborhood Strong including sharing their views of staff, the organization's mission, and their own definitions of success and literacy. In the following sections I will share some quotes that best exemplify the themes I found across the interviews.

What is kid success according to the Southwest community?

Success for children in the United States, particularly in the current era of neoliberal policies, has been narrowly defined by test scores and reading levels (Conner and Cosner, 2014). At the Southwest hub, the community members and staff who work closest with the children who Neighborhood Strong serves through their mission do not view success in such a way.

On the following pages are the quotations from Teodora and the participating mothers describing their views of success. An interesting finding across interviews for Southwest staff and community members is that there is a real emphasis on supporting parents (mainly mothers), and not just the children. This is counter to the dominant narrative of US individualism which

treats even children as autonomous beings who will excel or fail on their own, regardless of the world around them.

Each mother interviewed reflected on success in her own words, listed below in the table.

Table 4.2

Sampling of answers to the question, "what is kid success" by Southwest hub participants

Southwest Community Member Participant	Answer to the prompt, "*En sus propias palabras que significa 'el exito de los niños'*?/"In your own words, what is kid success?"
Veronica, Interview	"For my kids, it's being able to interact with other kids; or to be apart from me because that was something really hard for them, they have separation anxiety or something; they're like really attached to me"
Giselle, Interview	"*Que ellos estén saludables en todos los sentidos. Quiero decir tanto física como mentalmente y académicamente. Entonces esas tres cosas las he encontrado en Neighborhood Strong. Porque hemos tenido cursos tanto para-- pues que mejoren los niños académicamente y emocionalmente.* "That they are healthy in every way. I want to say…something physical like mentally and academically. Therefore, these three things we have found in Neighborhood Strong. Because we have taken classes for them all- that improve my children academically and emotionally."
Helena	"*Que sean felices, que lo que hagan en su vida los llene de satisfacción, no importa si son grandes personajes, un doctor o un simple labor en cualquier lugar, que ellos sean felices con lo que hacen y hagan las cosas por amor.* That they are happy, that they have a life full of satisfaction, it doesn't matter if they are great characters, a doctor or a simple worker in whatever place, that they are happy with what they have and they do things with love."
Honoria	*Mira, yo-- muchos dicen que siempre el éxito es como la felicidad. Y yo pienso que la felicidad se la tiene que buscar uno solito, no las cosas que te rodean. Es lo que yo les digo a los niños. Y el éxito que ellos tienen que es ser responsables, aprender cosas nuevas, ser independientes, estar conforme con lo que ellos están haciendo. Y creo que ahí los papás es donde tenemos que estar al pendiente de ellos. Hacer niños fuertes también, porque ahorita como está la sociedad, está bien trabajoso, mucho problema*

	por todo lados. Y pues, tratar de hacerlos fuertes y que sean autosuficientes más que nada. Look, many people say that success is like happiness. I think that happiness needs to be sought by a person themselves, not the things around you. It's like I tell the children. And the success that they have is to be responsible, to learn new things, to be independent, be satisfied with what they are doing. And I think that there with the parents is where we have to be on the lookout for them. Make strong children also, because right now how it is in society, it's very difficult, many problems from all directions. And so, try to make them strong and self-sufficient more than anything.

The four mothers described success in various ways, but none had a narrow view. Veronica named the development of particular social and emotional skills for her young children. Giselle referred to success as health and she noted there are physical, emotional, and academic components to it. Helena talked about success as a long-term outcome that includes happiness and life satisfaction regardless of social status. Honoria dismissed the idea of happiness as success. She said success involves responsibility, learning, independence, and (similar to Helena) satisfaction with what they do in life. Honoria focused on preparing children within the context of current society recognizing how children need to be prepared to participate in greater society.

Each of the mothers described how Neighborhood Strong was able to serve their family in particular ways that aligned with their view of success including socialization and academic and emotional development. Literacy programs at Neighborhood Strong, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic that isolated families from each other physically, made it possible to continue working toward families' visions of success.

Literacy at the Southwest hub

Literacy education is foundational to the mission of the organization and the low grade-level literacy rates in the city of Detroit are noted on the organization's website. In the chart

below are the answers to the questions I asked the community members: What is literacy? Is it important to kid success?

Table 4.3

Sampling of answers to the questions: What is literacy? Is it important to kid success? from

Southwest hub participants

Southwest Community Member Participant	Answer to the prompt, "In your own words, what is literacy? Is it important to kid success?"
Veronica, Interview	Reading, having access to books; my daughter is very visual, and my son has become too, I guess. We don't have that many books in Spanish but in English there are plenty of them. Yes, definitely, in every aspect;
Giselle, Interview	*El alfabetismo para mí es que las personas puedan leer, escribir y aprender de temas nuevos para crecer personalmente.* Literacy for me is that people can read, write, and learn new subjects to grow personally. *Claro. Sí, totalmente. Porque eso les da las herramientas necesarias para poder salir fuera de casa tanto a la escuela cuando ellos crecen, que tengan más oportunidades y que tengan un mayor conocimiento del mundo que los está rodeando./* Clearly, yes. Totally. Because literacy gives them the tools necessary to be able to leave the house to go to school and when they grow, they'll have more opportunities and will have a better understanding of the world around them.
Helena	*El alfabetismo yo creo que es el aprender, más que nada, a través de la lectura y actividades también.* Literacy, I think, is to learn, more than anything, through reading and activities as well. *Es importante. Por ejemplo, yo veo Neighborhood Strong se enfoca mucho en la lectura con los niños, y es algo que es muy importe para ellos porque entre más leen más aprenden también y les sirve a mejorar su vocabulario, su imaginación. Entonces sí va de la mano con el éxito la alfabetización, porque entre más conozcan, entre más sepan los niños, van a tener una vida más exitosa.*

	It 's important. For example, I see Neighborhood Strong focus a lot on reading with the children, and it's something that is very important for them because the more you read the more you learn also and it serves them to better their vocabulary, their imagination. So if literacy goes hand in hand with success, because the more they know, the more children know, they will have a more successful life.
Honoria	*Creo que es la manera de educar los niños, no sé si sea correcto. De enseñarles, quizá, la manera correcta de leer, de comunicarse y esa manera de convivir.* I think it's a way you educate children, not sure if I'm right. To teach them, perhaps, the right way to read, to communicate and that way of living together. *Creo que todo eso viene incluido en eso. Ser independientes. En lo personal, a mí me ayudó muchísimo cuando mis niños entraron a lo que viene ser al head start y al primer grado, porque yo los notaba, ¿cómo te digo? Un poquito más despiertos, más inteligentes, más-- manera de comunicarse con las maestras. Hacen que se desenvuelven, y eso fue bien importante. Hasta a mí siempre las maestras me han dicho que ¿qué he hecho con mis niños? Porque siempre son más autosuficientes y saben prácticamente desenvolverse un poquito más que los más niños que entran en la escuela sin que reciban estos programas.* I think all of that is included in that. Be independent. Personally, it helped me so much when my children went into Head Start and first grade because I noticed them, how do you say?,A little more awake, smarter, more -- way to communicate with teachers. They developed them, and that was very important. Even to me the teachers always asked me, "what did I do with my children"? Because they always were more self-sufficient and knew basically how to develop a little more than most of the other children that entered school without receiving those programs.

Most of the mothers interviewed described literacy as either a skill that is practiced (reading/ writing) or as a tool for learning, personal development, communication, and living together. Veronica included that literacy meant having access to reading material like books. Between the responses, there is consensus that literacy is important to success, but from various viewpoints. Veronica and Honoria referenced early literacy skills and how their own children

have developed and been prepared through early childhood literacy programs at Neighborhood Strong. Giselle and Helena reflected on literacy as a tool for success in the future. Giselle noted that literacy was a tool for independence and knowledge building. Helena described literacy as a way to grow knowledge, imagination, and vocabulary; describing knowledge as a key to a successful life.

The Southwest hub has several literacy program offerings. During the time period between March 3 and June 1, 2021, I observed fifteen hours of seven distinct programs delivered by various facilitators and partners. All the programs were observed via Zoom. Before observing, I asked for consent from the facilitator and the attendees of the meeting. I took field notes using a predetermined observation protocol based on my research questions and conceptual framework. Each of the mothers, or their children, had participated in one of the following programs.

Literacy program observations

The specific titles and hours of observations are in the table below. Immediately following the table, I provide further descriptions of each program.

Table 4.4

Basic information about the literacy program observations at the Southwest hub

Southwest Literacy/Language Program:	Facilitator/ Support	Race/Ethnicity/ Gender of Facilitator/Support	Number of programs/ Time observed	Language(s) of Program
Stories and Play	Partner facilitator-paid/ Staff translation	White woman/Latinx woman	(2) 2 hours	English with Spn support
313 Speaks-LENA playgroups	Volunteer facilitator/ Staff translation	White woman/Latinx woman	(2) 1 hour	English with Spn Translation
Play & Learn	Staff facilitator	Latinx woman/ Latinx woman	(2) 2 hours	Bilingual: Spanish;

				some English
BookNook	Volunteer tutors/ Staff manages program	varied	(3) 3 hours	English with Spanish tech support
CFS tutoring	Volunteer tutors/ Staff manages program	varied	(4) 3 hours	English
Stories and STEM	Partner facilitator/ Staff translator	White woman/Latinx woman	(2) 2 hours	English with Spanish support
Total programs: 6	Staff facilitator: 1 Partner/volunteer facilitator: 6 Staff translator: 3 Staff manages program: 3		Total observations: 15 Total hrs: 13	

Literacy program overviews

The six programs I observed during my data collection period represent a portion of the programs offered through the Southwest hub at any given time. In the pages below, I have organized the six programs into the following groups: early language and literacy programs, one-on-one tutoring programs, and other literacy programs.

Early language and literacy programs

LENA stands for Language Environment Analysis and is a national partner of the organization. LENA Start is their popular curriculum for adults with babies and toddlers (0-3) that has been offered in-person and virtually across Neighborhood Strong sites since 2016. According to their website, LENA Start "is an evidence-based community program designed to engage families and help them learn how to increase conversation with their children during the

first few years of life. Interactive talk — specifically back-and-forth conversation — has been proven to be a key factor in healthy early brain development" (LENA.org). The program employs a wearable recording device, or talk pedometer, that provides families with concrete data across the 11 weeks in the cohort. This device and the companion technology produce charts showing the daily and hourly adult words, daily and hourly conversational turns (also known as call-and-response), and daily and hourly TV/electronics sounds. Participants earn "stars" on their weekly report and those stars are accumulated across the cohort, encouraging teamwork and incentivizing growth across time. This program is a Neighborhood Strong staple and is implemented in partnership with the Black Family Development Corporation and the city of Detroit.

313Speaks virtual playgroup is a parent-child program that was designed and developed by Neighborhood Strong as an offshoot of the LENA Home curriculum. This program tracks conversational turns with the same talk pedometer technology as the LENA Start program. Detroit, MI is one of five cities in the country to pilot this LENA-inspired program based on the results of a similar program called Providence Talks in Rhode Island. This project is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies and Neighborhood Strong was selected as a partner to support the city-wide effort.

Notably, the original LENA programs were developed from research of the "30-million-word gap" which refers to a regularly debated study where researchers found a significant difference based on the income levels of the families which were sorted as "professional", "working class", and "welfare" (Hart and Risley, 1995; Kuchirko, 2019). Some critics argue that the "word gap" phrasing implies a deficit-orientation, particularly for families of color and those experiencing poverty. Dudley-Marling and Lucas (2009) call out issues with the influential Hart

and Risley work by naming methodological flaws, ethnocentric bias, and a lack of clear theory driving the study. They say, "for educators persuaded by this deficit perspective, closing the achievement gap that plagues American schools requires interventions that change how parents living in poverty interact with their children" (p. 364).

Despite ongoing controversy about a deficit orientation, LENA continues to be a growing early language program and their work continues. According to their website, the data derived from the use of their talk pedometers that indicate that the differences between conversational turn taking (and not individual words) is most apparent across socioeconomic status, higher-income versus lower-income households and it is actually more like a 4-million-word difference. Despite moving away from the term "30-million-word gap" they continue to use the term "early talk gap" and focusing on intervention with economically disadvantaged families (https://www.lena.org/achievement-gap/).

The LENA messaging that focuses on deficiencies and the "gap" is apparent when I speak with literacy facilitators, as indicated in later chapters. For example, when I spoke to Teodora, she described the "talk gap" and low-income families saying:

When they're entering into kindergarten, they've already got some of the basics in there that will allow them for success, because a lot of our families, they're on survival mode, so they don't understand... I just had a training this morning about that. Our families use a lot of business talk, and I don't know if you've heard it before, business talk is pretty much, "This needs to get done. Do this, do that, do this, do that." They're not really building the children's vocabulary for them to have success in life, so they're going to school, and you probably have heard of the talk gap. There's a whole booklet about it, where low-income families really do not have that much vocabulary in their head now,

because they're not talking or learning as many new words when they're ready to start

school. (Teodora interview, November 13, 2020).

As indicated by the above quotation, staff development through LENA Start and the 313Speaks

playgroup program and related professional development have influenced staff and facilitators'

understanding of literacy development and the role of families.

Jugar y Aprender/Play and Learn program is an in-house play group developed by the

Southwest hub's Community Engagement Coordinator, P. I knew that the program was designed

by the staff Teodora gave more context, "Play and Learns are actually made by our staff and

they're based on the HighScope curriculum. We put into play the COR HighScope so we involve

all those things, which on the top of my mind I can't tell you what the five are" (Teodora

interview, November 13, 2020). She seemed to be referencing an assessment that was designed

for the popular prekindergarten curriculum called HighScope. The Cor Kindergarten assessment

has five areas of focus: literacy and language; mathematics; health and physical development;

approaches to learning; and social and emotional development. The staff at the hub were trained

in this model and now develop the play and learn programs using a backwards design with each

of the sessions including practice in those five categories. This program is a truly bilingual

experience; the virtual sessions I observed were all run by Perla, whose first language is Spanish,

and she is bilingual in English.

One-to-one literacy tutoring programs

Another group of programs I observed were literacy tutoring programs for children in

grades K-3. Similar to the early language development classes, the literacy programs I observed

were a mix of national partner programs and local community-grown programs, but each

integrated a model of one-to-one adult-to-child tutoring.

BookNook is a national partner and "dual-bottom line" social enterprise that grew from a small 2016 pilot in San Francisco, CA to have a growing reach across the country. This program is facilitated through an online platform but was originally designed to be delivered in person and in a small group format. In the original program, each child logged into their individualized account on their own tablet or computer and a teacher or tutor acted as a guide, asking pre-determined questions and keeping the pace of the lesson moving. Due to the pandemic, the program went fully virtual, and the Neighborhood Strong model turned the original program into a one-on-one format with volunteer tutors who met with one student virtually. Built into the program are hints or tips for the tutor, a kind of passive coaching, throughout the lesson. Below are examples of the "reading guide", or tutor, screen and the student screen during various parts of a lesson taken from the BookNook website (https://www.booknooklearning.com/product/). Tutors are prompted throughout the lesson from their own screen. An interesting feature of these observations is that when I was on Zoom calls, either the child or the tutor needed to share their BookNook screen with me, otherwise I couldn't see what either of them were seeing, doing, or reading. Without the student sharing their screen, the tutor was also unable to see how the child was interacting with the games, text, and quizzes on the screen as the program moved them along to the next task. This was challenging for me as an observer as I was unable to see how the child was interacting with the tasks. Book Nook has a dual-language program that incorporates both English and Spanish into the vocabulary which I was able to observe.
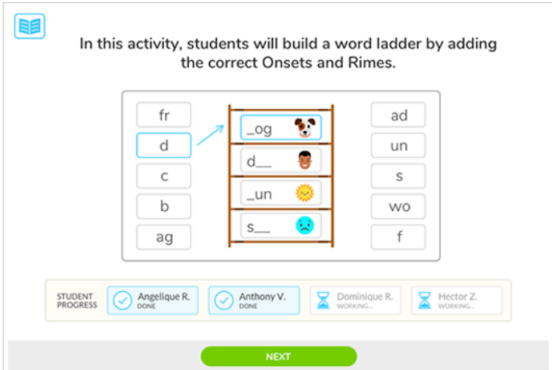
Figure 4.5

Example of BookNook screen during small group lesson from BookNook website
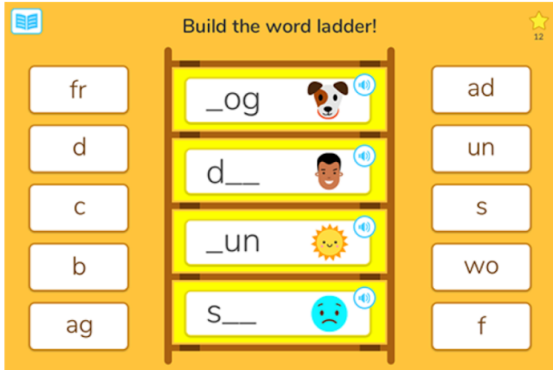
Small Group

Small Group sessions typically support 2-6 students with a dedicated Reading Guide.
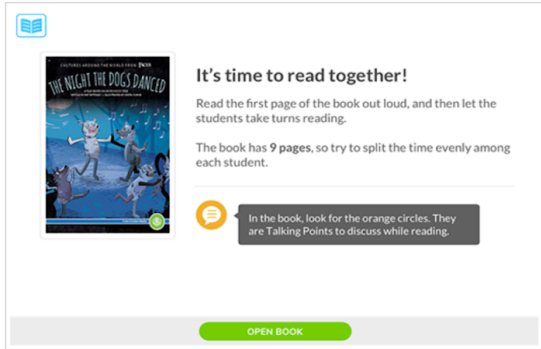
BookNook provides scaffolding for teachers and Reading Guides. Each lesson is filled with helpful tips, as well as features to help monitor student progress in real time.

Example of BookNook screen during comprehension lesson
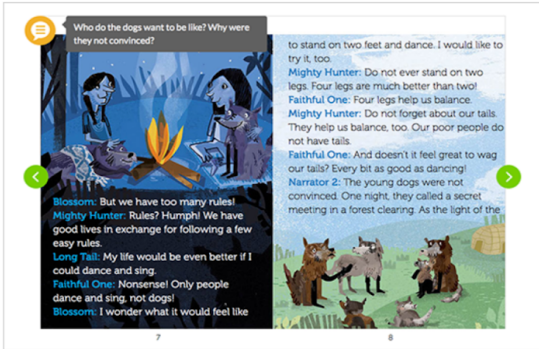
Small Group

Small Group sessions typically support 2-6 students with a dedicated Reading Guide.

Each Comprehension lesson features a level-appropriate book, with Talking Points included to discuss the story.

Center for Success is a local nonprofit, started in 2013 in nearby Pontiac, MI. The organization has brought mentor-focused literacy tutoring programs to Pontiac and Detroit through various community partnerships, including with Neighborhood Strong. This local

organization is led by former teachers who bring literacy teaching expertise to the development of the program. Originally developed as an in-person, after-school twice weekly program, the program transitioned to a virtual format in spring 2020 due to the pandemic-related restrictions on in-person programming. The organization emphasizes the importance of relationship-building and matches children with volunteer mentors who are trained in the routines and activities related to literacy. Mentors are also required to take a two hour "Mentoring for Equity" training, which demonstrates their awareness of and intent to disrupt the embedded inequalities of the educational system and societal narratives about communities of color and families experiencing poverty. On the Center for Success website, the training is described as follows, "This workshop will serve as an introduction to the ways that history, privilege, and bias can impact our roles as mentors. We will create a brave space to discuss tough topics and to expand our understanding so that we can be better partners to our students and their families"

(https://www.center4success.org/call-to-action).

Tutoring sessions are individualized and informed by a thorough range of early literacy assessments including instruments measuring phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge, reading fluency, and comprehension. Center for Success programs allow for the students to make choices within their lesson (what book to read together, how much mentor reads vs student, what game to practice a skill, etc.) and that structure makes the CFS program flexible and motivating. Mentors are trained for implementing literacy lessons and are offered continuing support and guidance from program leads (who also navigate the logistics of the sessions). While there were family-focused informational sessions in previous (in-person) iterations of the program, they were not being offered virtually at the Neighborhood Strong hub during the time of my observations.

Other literacy programs

Stories and Play is offered by a local partner and early childhood educator. Each class offers singing, reading, storytelling, and playing with small felt characters and craft materials. Stories and Play emphasizes the development of oral language skills, vocabulary development, and imagination through play and storytelling for small children. Children are offered many opportunities to work on their expressive language skills as they answer questions, describe their creations, and retell stories. The elementary version of this program includes an emphasis on genres such as fairy tales and fables. The children are encouraged to become "story makers" while using hands-on materials to create scenes and act out their ideas (https://storiesandplay.com/).

Stories and STEM combines literacy and an introduction to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics themes. The programs are developed and facilitated by a former science teacher and have been offered virtually and in-person. The structure of the program involves a science-themed read aloud and hands-on science-based activities. This program aims to promote academic vocabulary development, oral language development, and STEM-focused skills and is intended for children and their caregivers.

Findings from Southwest Literacy observations

Each of the six programs I observed was unique. Beyond all being either facilitated or supported by Southwest hub staff, each program had its own rhythm and focus. Across the programs, all the participating parents and children were Latinx. The programs were offered in a mix of Spanish and English. There was Spanish language support (the presence of a staff member) in all the programs with the exception of the one-to-one tutors who did not speak Spanish. In the tutoring programs, a bilingual staff facilitator was available to contact families

but the instruction and interaction with the tutor or mentor was in English. In the following

sections, I draw upon my observation field notes and memos to illuminate the findings related to

the literacy programs that answer the second part of research question 2: How do literacy

practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?

"Las Maestras están Aquí"/The Teachers are Here

Many of the group-focused programs that were facilitated by trained educators, such as

Stories and STEM, Stories and Play, and Play and Learn, had more participants, a consistent

format, and more observed opportunities for engaging in vocabulary development and structured

opportunity for student talk as compared to the observed 313Speaks playgroup and BookNook

sessions.

Each of these programs had a group of between nine and twelve children participating

during each session. The facilitators moved through a set format, often using songs to start the

session. I use my field notes to describe what this looks like in the Play and Learn space,

> *Perla moves between Spanish (her first language) and English throughout the sixty-*
> *minute program. Most of the program is in Spanish including the song that kicks off the*
> *session about who is present today. They sing to the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell"*
> *naming today's participants, "Las niñas están aquí hoy/The girls are here today", then*
> *"los niños/the boys", after that "las mamás/the mamas", then Perla scans the Zoom call*
> *and uses her knowledge of the participants and says, "yo veo una abuela hoy/I see a*
> *grandmother today" so they all sing the verse again with abuela and finally they sing a*
> *round of, "las maestras están aquí hoy/the teachers are here today". Perla is working*
> *with another Southwest staff member who supports her with the technology and materials*

throughout the call, but she is undeniably the teacher commanding this space. (Field

notes from March 23, 2021, observation).

Caroline, the facilitator of the Stories and Play program engages children in imaginative play and

story retelling,

The facilitator was a middle-aged White woman and former early childhood educator

named Caroline. The attending staff available for Spanish translation was Abril who

attended with her five-year-old daughter. The program was as described- a space for

storytelling, retelling, and play. A unique feature of this program are the materials that

families picked up at the weekly distribution to use during this time. Caroline employs

wooden dowels, sticks, Play-doh, things found in nature, and pieces of felted fabric to

create scenes for stories. The children who signed up were able to work from home with

their own Play-doh, wooden dowels and blocks. The program was delivered exclusively

in English including singing songs, listening to a story being read, reviewing vocabulary

words, retelling previous stories, and opportunities for children to describe the scenes

they created (i.e., on St. Patrick's Day the children made leprechaun traps with their

materials). During this program I noted there was a lot of listening for the children and,

as advertised, a consistent opportunity for play and imagination. Caroline was well-

organized, prepared, and moved smoothly from activity to activity on Zoom. (Field notes

from March 17, 2021, observation).

All the teacher-trained facilitators created opportunities for children to talk during their

programs. For Stories and Play, the children were prompted to retell stories from previous weeks

and prompted to play with their materials for a significant portion of the program. Caroline

called on the children to describe their creations. She was warm and engaging but the material

was presented in a neutral way that did not appear to be culturally or linguistically responsive nor did it engage students "pedagogically in ways that respect the students' social history and intellect" (Moll, 2019, p.137).

Fran from Stories and STEM has decades-long experience teaching children science at elite private schools in the metro-Detroit area. She developed the Stories and STEM programs and relied on her deep content and pedagogical knowledge to pivot from in-person to virtual instruction. While there are no sing-alongs in her program, there is always a read aloud of a book related to a STEM concept she will be teaching. When she elicits student talk it's in the style of a science educator. For example, after the children and their accompanying adults made two differently constructed kites and tested them outside, when they returned to their Zoom call she asked, *"What did you notice?", "What happened", "Why do you think that one flew so well?" "What do you think the stick did?", "Any other things we notice?"* (Field notes from May 25, 2021, observation). Fran took the children's experiments very seriously and her enthusiasm for both the subject-matter and creating space for children to talk about their thinking was evident. Her program required an adult to assist in the science experiments.

Volunteer ability varied widely

The former-teacher facilitators I mentioned above brought their content and pedagogical knowledge to their programs. This partner-facilitator format is just one of the ways Neighborhood Strong brings programs to their participants. Many times, facilitators are volunteers with a wide range of life experiences. There were several programs that were volunteer led: both one-on-one tutoring programs, Center for Success and BookNook; and 313Speaks virtual playgroup. The literacy programs vary in how they are developed and by whom and how they are facilitated. Those factors determine how culturally and linguistically

responsive the programs are, if at all. For example, Center for Success requires a "Mentoring for Equity" training that requires mentors to critically reflect on their own identities and understanding of race, culture, language, and power in this country similar to Saathoff (2015) incorporating CRT and funds of knowledge. BookNook, a non-local tutoring platform has a dual-language option that created a more linguistically responsive program on screen which created more of a "two-way street" (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009) and a way for children to draw upon their linguistic knowledge and engage Spanish-speaking family members who were present for the lessons.

"Most of us speak Spanish at home"

Volunteers are critical to the mission of the organization and are often-times are the people who are coming together "across zip codes'' (i.e., they don't live in Detroit) to make programs work. An example of this is the 313Speaks virtual playgroup, which was facilitated by a long-time Southwest volunteer and translated by Teodora. The 30-minute sessions were delivered by Linda, a White woman and longtime Southwest hub volunteer who speaks some Spanish. Teodora was present to do direct translation throughout the session. Each week had a theme and they followed a schedule with the babies, toddlers, and parents in attendance which included: singing a song, reading a book, a small hands-on activity, and closing with another song. The first week the theme was water.

Everyone seemed to have a copy of the book *Rainbow Fish* (in English) and while Linda read, Teodora did an on-the-spot translation of the text, while she tended to her children in the background. It was an amazing feat, but the general English-to-Spanish translation pace of the class was cumbersome and clunky. This program had a very small cohort (3 participants) and was lacking the finesse that was evident in the technologically agile and smooth-running

programs from the trained teacher facilitators, Caroline and Fran. For example, in another session, Linda began to play a YouTube video of a popular book, *Barnyard Dance* by Sandra Boynton. She asked Teodora to translate, again, on demand and at a rapid pace with the on-going video which included English words like "promenade", "skitter", "prance", "strut", and the phrase "turn with the cow in a patch of clover". Teodora laughed at herself when she got stuck here, unable to translate the word "clover". As she struggled to find the Spanish equivalent of this rhymable plant off the top of her head, she laughed and sighed, "I'm having a bad day today" (fieldnotes, March 15, 2021).

The examples above show that even though the program was knowingly delivered to a group of Spanish-speaking parents and babies, the lack of linguistic preparation demonstrated how normal and easy it is to default to English in educational spaces in order to accommodate the facilitators and the curriculum instead of the participants. This exemplified the "language and cultural barriers" that many Latinx families have reported within educational spaces (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009, p. 14). English language instruction and materials are indicative of the dominant and default forces that marginalize communities like those at Southwest (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016).

These tensions were also evident when Linda and Teodora asked the participants for any feedback on the program. The only suggestion was from one of the mothers who said in English, "More Spanish songs we can share, most of us speak Spanish at home". The other parents nodded in agreement while Linda responded, "if you know some songs let Teodora know". It was clear, this program was not designed with this set of families in mind and there was a failure to respond to this throughout the previous eight weeks.

In this case, despite being trained in the content of 313Speaks, Linda is lacking the pedagogical and linguistic knowledge to facilitate the class and Teodora mostly excelled, but sometimes struggled, with the role of on-demand translator.

Linda, Caroline, and Fran were limited by their cultural and linguistic repertoires. When I asked Teodora about this situation in a follow-up interview, she recalled the example of the 313Reads session and reflected on her limited capacity to enhance the curriculum, "I think I've just been limited on my end. It's just with the virtual environment, I feel like you go from meeting to meeting to meeting all day long" (Teodora interview, June 9, 2021).

Without a curriculum that was designed for their community, and facilitators who can deliver the curriculum in the language of the community, the load of translation and programming decisions are placed on Teodora's long list of responsibilities, as detailed in the following section. In some ways Teodora's overload exemplifies the start-up energy and social enterprise model of the nonprofit that has really grown and expanded and requires staff to continue to do the same. Even though there is a focus on the mission, there's also a reproduction of transactional program delivery reminiscent of business models (Saebi, Foss, & Linder, 2019).

"A lot of the programming that comes is just generalized"

Across the language and literacy programs I observed, there are very few examples of the Southwest hub community influencing how the program is designed or delivered. One exception to this is the Southwest hub-created and facilitated *Jugar y Aprender*/Play and Learn. I sought to observe various neighborhoods' literacy programs to understand if and how the neighborhood population influenced the programs offered.

I found that even though participants were attracted to the hub because of Spanish language accessibility, most of the literacy programs I observed did not offer much by way of

culturally or linguistically relevant instruction. Teodora confirmed that when programs (all programs, not just literacy programs) come to Southwest, the onus is often on the hub staff to translate, "We were really blessed that LENA already was in Spanish, offered in Spanish. All the materials were in Spanish, so we did not have to translate. I want to say 80-90% of the programs were not offered in Spanish, and we would have to translate" (Teodora interview, November 13, 2020). In the family literature research, Rodriguez-Brown (2010) says, "enrichment programs allow parents to share literacy with their children in the language they know better and to continue to share literacy activities that are culturally specific even though they do not resemble school activities" (p. 743). The family literacy programs at Southwest are not designed in this way.

To me, this is surprising because it was accepted as normal for Teodora that her hub, with the largest number of participants, who happen to be Spanish speakers, would be supplied with English-only materials that she and her staff would then need to translate. In her discussion of the programs, I was reminded of the dominant narratives that permeate the social levels of the multilevel sociopolitical framework and I see that "whose literacies are valued?" is clear for the staff of Southwest. I was curious to find out how community members felt about the language of the program and the use of translation (or not). The four mothers I interviewed had varying opinions which reflected their own preferences and their hopes for their children.

Honoria, who lives in a suburb of the city, expressed that she was grateful for the Spanish language programs in Detroit but didn't touch on the issue of translation. She stated that the classes in Spanish was *"la ventaja*/the perk" that attracted her to the Southwest hub. (Honoria interview, August 24, 2021). Veronica is bilingual and I asked her opinion on programs being translated. She shared that having programs in English could be helpful to her fellow

participants, "I think with the both languages is good, because if I don't get something in English I get in Spanish or the other way around. So sometimes my brain doesn't communicate well, and I feel like it would help other parents if they don't like learn English at least listen to it." In an important addition, she aligned with my noticing of the English language books in the 313Speaks program, "Yeah, but having the materials, the print materials in Spanish, the books and handouts would be better" (Veronica interview, August 23, 2021).

In her interview, Giselle described her view of programming in English and Spanish and how each language is important to her when she considers her children learning,

Para nosotros es importante también aprender el inglés, sobre todo para los niños. Por ejemplo, para los niños hay una clase ahorita que se llama [inaudible] o algo así, donde la maestra habla totalmente en inglés, pero Perla está ahí todo el tiempo por si hay alguna pregunta. Pero creo que sí es importante también tener en nuestro idioma para que los niños no lo olviden y puedan ser bilingües, ¿no? For us it's important to also learn English, especially for the kids. For example, for the kids there is a class right now where the teacher speaks completely in English, but Perla is there the whole time in case there's a question. But I also think that yes, it is also important to have our own language so that our children don't forget, and they can be bilingual, right?

Helena, who had been participating at the Southwest hub for several years, reflected on previous years when most of the programs were given in English and translated, "*Eso se dificultaba mucho*/That was very difficult". But now that Abril (a Spanish-speaking global team member) is part of the staff at the hub, she facilitates programs in Spanish. She described how having translators didn't work for her and how people would complain,

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*...muchas veces yo llegaba a escuchar: "No, pues es que ni le entiendo y se me hace
enfadoso, me aburre que me tienen que estar traduciendo o cosas así". Entonces, eso era
la parte difícil. Pero ahorita ya que los dan todos en español, todos están bien yo creo.
/...many times, I would arrive to hear, "No, it's that I don't even understand them, and it
makes me angry, I'm bored that they have to be translating" or things like that. So, that
was the difficult part. But right now, since they [the programs] are all in Spanish, they are
all good, I think.* (Helena interview, August 26, 2021).

The 313Speaks virtual playgroup was delivered by a limited-Spanish, English speaking
volunteer and accompanied by Teodora who translated on demand. As previously discussed, the
program appeared to be designed for English speakers. Despite there being accessible and
equivalent Spanish language books, the families all received the English language version of the
Rainbow Fish in their homes. Despite there being many ways to access linguistically and
culturally relevant nursery rhyme songs for toddlers and babies in Spanish and from Mexican
and Central American culture, the facilitator followed the curriculum which distanced the
participating families from the material. The lack of attention to language and culture in this
playgroup represents the typical exclusion from participating in the space that immigrant and
Spanish-speaking families experience in many ways throughout their children's educational
experiences, and it makes explicit the role of power in family engagement and learning (Lewis &
Moje, 2003).

Similarly, the Stories and Play and the Stories and STEM facilitators rarely employed the
staff that were there to support them with language access. Caroline from Stories and Play
engaged the children from her perspective. She prompted her students to talk about their
creations. That seemed challenging for some of the children to describe their work in English.

For example, after several minutes working on making a leprechaun trap, Caroline asked the children to unmute and talk about what they built. A boy, referencing his elaborate set up of sticks and Play-doh, couldn't find the words to describe what he'd done. He said, "You put a penny and like…him fall in the trap" (Field notes, Stories and Play observation, March 17, 2021). In this moment, Abril could have been used as a language support so the child could fully express his ideas in his first language (which every other attendee would understand) and she could support him in translating into English for Caroline and for English language practice.

During the program, Caroline incorporated parts of her own life in the lesson but I did not observe her relating those experiences back to the children and their lived experiences. She talked about her beach vacation and the seashells she collected to make a mandala, "Mother Earth gives us the best toys and they're free!" (fieldnotes, March 3, 2021). She referenced Irish music and St. Patrick without any connections to the children's own backgrounds or experiences with similar holidays or religious entities. The play-based story experiences were well-implemented and appeared to be motivating to the children but there was a notable absence of linguistic and cultural relevance to the students.

Stories and STEM for Southwest was attended by Perla (the Play and Learn facilitator) for linguistic support. Fran began one of the programs by reading a book entitled *Kite Flying* by Grace Lin. The book told a story about a girl creating and flying a kite with her family and it incorporated Mandarin words (Ba Ba, Mai Mai, Jie Jie). Fran had Perla translate along with the story as she read. After that, the group of children and their adult caregivers followed a set of all-English directions while she displayed visual instructions to create and experiment with two different kinds of kites. This seemed like the most important communication of the hour, but only the story was translated. Giselle's quote above indicates that she as a parent sees Perla's

presence as a tool to communicate in English-speaking environments but this communication was not evident. I want to note that it is possible that families were communicating with Perla via the Zoom chat function or text messaging. As I will discuss in the following section on the Dexter-Linwood literacy programs, Fran gave an almost-identical class for the African American participants the hour before.

Fran was able to engage with Perla's knowledge of the families and individuals present. In one of the classes, she asked Perla for the name of a child's older sibling that had joined in the background. This kind of relational support is another tool that outside facilitators could access with the neighborhood staff, but I did not observe it happening very often.

The Southwest hub participants were able to access a dual-language version of the BookNook program. I observed Giselle's son was using this version during one of the tutoring sessions. The program followed the same format as the others I observed, it just had both English and Spanish words and definitions during new vocabulary games and comprehension questions. Despite having a monolingual English-speaking tutor, the child had some Spanish-language tools to support his understanding of new vocabulary. Some of the volunteers were bilingual, but there was not a linguistic match for all students, which could limit the ability to share important information and build rapport and relationships with families. For some families, Zoom may have been a helpful way to be a part of lessons and communicate with the tutors, but this advantage was lost when there was a language divide and no training for tutors about how to connect with families. But, in the case of Giselle's children, having an English-speaking tutor nudged them into their next phase of English language development as they worked with monolingual tutors.

In our interview, I asked Teodora if there were programs that were designed specifically for their families and she said,

     Most of our programs is not ridden with our culture. It's not really appropriate sometimes, you know. We've had stuff brought to us, like breastfeeding–what is it BMA, Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association. There's stuff that we translate that's not always culturally appropriate, so for something like [a program designed for parents of English Learners] offered was just so wonderful because they can really, what do you call it, reference their own culture and really be able to understand what you are talking about because they really interacted with it, so that makes the biggest difference when you're learning something new, if you're able to kind of cross-reference, or I don't know what you call it, draw from your own personal… background knowledge. (Teodora interview, November 13, 2020).

Between staff and community member interviews, observations, and artifacts from the literacy programs, I found that with few exceptions, the literacy programs that serve the Southwest hub were not designed or modified with the linguistic and cultural makeup of the Southwest community in mind. The work of translating, literally, is on the neighborhood staff. Community engagement staff at Southwest had many roles but it was interesting to see how necessary, valuable, and taken for granted their linguistic brokering was to literacy programs. Despite being ultimately responsible for the material, the staff was not themselves engaged in the co-designing or development of the programs, possibly reinforcing, reproducing, and translating to their own language the dominant norms and storylines given to them (Barajas-Lopez and Ishimaru, 2016).

Tutoring: "*Les entienden y los tratan con amor, no importando si hablan bien o no inglés/*They taught them and treated them with love, no matter if they spoke English well or not"

Neighborhood Strong has emphasized their commitment to providing what they call "high-dosage" tutoring with various partners, including the Center for Success and BookNook. Both programs rely on volunteers to commit 1-2 hours per week to work with the same student. Below are some differences between the training and support of the two sets of volunteers.

The partner organization, Center for Success, uses a training model for volunteer mentors in order to give them a beginning understanding of the foundations of literacy, the assessments their students will take, the ways to practice different literacy skills, and they offer on-going coaching to their mentors. As mentioned previously, they also require Mentoring for Equity training that addresses systemic issues in education equity and an introduction to navigating linguistic and cultural literacy while mentoring students in the program. There is a stated focus on the importance of the mentor/mentee relationships within this one-on-one tutoring model.

BookNook, a national partner organization, has a basic online volunteer tutor training that all volunteers take to get familiar with the software that they use. The program prompts the tutor throughout the session to ask particular questions or give particular directions to their student. The focus of this program is for the tutor to guide the student through the computer program.

Regardless of which program their child participated in, so many of the parents at Southwest, including Teodora, commented on how much their child enjoyed working with their tutor.

Table 4.

Sampling of Southwest participants discussing one-on-one tutoring experiences

Southwest Participant	Discussing one-on-one tutoring experience

Teodora	Well now that it's virtual I feel like they're more grounded, the mentors are sticking, sticking in there. They've really been able to build relationships with their children. There's still that distraction component, you know, as well as in person, as in home, but I feel like they're enjoying that outside connection, especially now. The children aren't isolated and if they're not going to school in person, then they still have that outside connection. I know (my son) has really enjoyed it, and it's one of his favorite classes. (Interview, November 13, 2020)
Giselle	*Los más impactantes para nosotros fueron las tutorías para los niños, que sí han aprendido mucho.* The most impactful for us was the tutoring for our boys, they have learned so much. *Y la verdad es que les ha ayudado muchísimo. A mí me encanta porque ahora en la pandemia ellos tuvieron una conexión con sus tutoras increíble que hasta lloraron cuando se terminó el programa y las clases iban a terminar. De verdad, increíble. Y a nosotros nos sirve porque con ellas hablan el inglés.* The truth is that [tutoring] has helped the most. I loved it because right now in the pandemic they had an incredible connection with their tutors who even cried when they finished the program, and their classes were going to end. Really incredible. And it helped us because they spoke English with them. *Fue exitoso sobre todo con las tutorías. Es que ese programa a mí me ha encantado, porque tú sabes que para mis hijos son muy importantes y la parte de estar aquí en un lugar donde no se habla su idioma, para mí ese programa de las tutorías fue muy importante y de la relación que tenían con otros niños cuando podíamos ir ahí al edificio de Neighborhood Strong. Cuando ellos empezaron la tutoría de la lectura, ellos de verdad que empezaron a leer más. Me dejé de preocupar tanto porque no podían leer, y no les gustaba hablar inglés [risas]. La verdad es que esos programas para mis hijos les ha ayudado mucho a desenvolverse en el idioma inglés, y que aparte, a pesar de que ellos no hablan perfecto el inglés, les entienden y los tratan con amor, no importando si hablan bien o no inglés.* The tutoring was especially successful. I have loved that program, because you know that my sons are very important and part of being here in a place where they don't speak their language, for me the tutoring program was very important and the relationship that they had with other children when

	we could go there to the Neighborhood Strong building. When they started reading tutoring, they began to really read more. I stopped worrying so much that they couldn't read and that they didn't like to speak English [laughs]. The truth is that these programs for my children have helped them develop so much in the English language, they taught them and treated them with love, no matter if they spoke English well or not. *(Interview, August 24, 2021)*
Helena	*Sí, sí me gustó. Además, que la tutora que tuvo mi hijo era muy paciente. Mi niño se distrae fácil y empieza a hablar de otras cosas, y ella lo tomaba con mucha calma y le ayudaba bastante.* Yes, yes, I liked it [the program]. What's more, the tutor that had my son was very patient. My child is easily distracted and started to talk about other things, and she took it very calmly and helped him a lot. (Interview, August 26, 2021)

In the above quotations, parents spoke from their experiences of their child working with a volunteer tutor in one of the one-to-one programs offered through the site. Teodora and Giselle reflected on the importance of their children having an outside connection during the pandemic. For Giselle, it was a space for her children to learn and be loved. In that space, they began to read and to use English, which they had been resistant to before. For Helena, the tutor was someone who showed patience for her son.

Teodora spoke from the perspective of the Community Engagement Manager who oversaw the programs at the site, and she identified the growth of the program in its virtual format. Volunteers, even with the varied lived experiences they have and variety of training they receive, provide a critical component of the mission which includes neighbor-to-neighbor connection. Often, that neighbor isn't geographically nearby. Teodora explained,

> That's one of the good things that have come from COVID. It feels like we have more
>
> volunteers, people are more able to volunteer and do more mentoring from their home
>
> than ever before. Before it was difficult to have volunteers coming in from the suburbs,

from different areas driving 40-45 minutes, so that has really allowed for our, to just

flourish, you know, the tutoring. We have two different tutoring programs. I don't know

at this point how many families are involved. I want to say it's 70-75 just from

Southwest. (Teodora interview, November 13, 2020).

Moving away from literacy programming, in the next section, I discuss a finding that was

revealed through the community member interviews. The focus of many programs is on children

aged 0-8, the mission involves creating kid success families. The mothers I spoke with spoke

enthusiastically about participating in adult education and support programs.

Community Connection

Interestingly, all of the mothers I spoke with at Southwest referred to attending adult

classes including *Matrimonios Seguros*/Secure Marriages, *Autoestima*/Self-esteem and/or

*Control de ira/*Anger Management programs. These adult programs created a space for the

mothers I interviewed to process their own feelings and relationships to themselves and others.

Additionally, Giselle referred to a program at Southwest called *Cafe Para Padres*/Coffee for

Parents, an informal space for parents to gather virtually. Evident in every interview was the

importance of having the opportunity to strengthen connections with other parents, especially

when the Southwest hub closed the physical space.

Giselle reflected on her spouse being home during the pandemic and how it was stressful,

but it also allowed her husband to be available for the children and to take the Healthy Marriages

class with her, "*Entonces la verdad es que sí nos ayudó muchísimo tener estos talleres y el poder

platicar con otras mamás*. So, the truth is that it did help us a lot to have these workshops and to

be able to talk with other moms" (Giselle interview, August 24, 2021).

Helena described the community as made of her closest friends and described how the programs allows them to grow saying, "*Y es bonito, porque nos apoyamos mutuamente ahí cuando tenemos programas en los que platicamos a veces nuestros problemas, o al escuchar los problemas de otras nos entendemos, nos apoyamos y aprendemos más. Es una bonita comunidad.* And it's beautiful, because we support each other mutually there when we have programs in which we chat and sometimes about our problems, or to listen to other peoples' problems and understand each other, we support each other, and we learn more." (Helena, interview August 26, 2021).

Honoria talked about how the programs offered allow her to see herself differently,

"*...te dan una oportunidad de ser tú y conoces muchas mamás con diferentes situaciones y a veces yo digo, 'ay, no.' Escucho la situación de la otra mamá y digo, 'ay, no. Yo no estoy tan mal'. Porqué te quejas ¿verdad? De lo que tienes, y digo, "no, estoy perfecta. Estoy perfecta [risas]"* …they give you an opportunity to be yourself and get to know many mothers with different situations and sometimes I say 'oh, no'. I listen to a situation from another mom, and I say, 'oh no. I am not so bad'. Because I complain, right? About what I have, and I say, 'no, I'm perfect. I'm perfect.' [laughs] (Honoria, interview August 24, 2021).

Veronica, who said she doesn't have much interaction with other adults in her daily life because her friends and family are all busy with work, relied on virtual programs to connect to other adults. "Being able to have the online classes have saved my sanity because with the kids and now be able to see other people…With classes is like a bit more easy to go having to talk like the baby talks." (Veronica, interview August 23, 2021).

Having a virtual network of moms to turn to for support seemed to be a protective factor for these parents during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teodora reported the same in her interview

saying, "A lot of them have said it's really kept them sane; it's kept them preoccupied in other things and it's really helped their mental health" (November 13, 2020). Neighborhood Strong's ability to support families with young children is aligned with some of the family literacy and family engagement literature that describe how community agencies can be social supports for immigrants (Dearing, Sibley, and Nguyen, 2015) and how literacy programs extend beyond literacy to support caregiver's self-efficacy and confidence (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009).

Finding and Accessing the Southwest Hub

How do families find and access Neighborhood Strong's Southwest hub? The mothers I interviewed had different entry points: a pediatrician recommending the LENA program, personal connections, and a chance encounter with Abril at the Mexican Consulate in Detroit. In this small sampling of participants, there are examples of family engagement strategies that create the welcoming environment families are drawn to and continue to participate in.

Personal relationships and word of mouth is one way Southwest continues to increase their participation to nearly half of all participants in the city. Some of the programs that are offered organization-wide include Community Baby Showers where anyone who is expecting a baby can sign up to receive baby necessities such as diapers and clothing.

Social media is another form of sharing information with our personal network and community. Teodora feels confident that social media is one of the most powerful ways to engage the Latinx community. She explained the Southwest staff's use of the communication tool,

> We have really known how to take full advantage of social media, and especially
> Facebook, and so because of Facebook and reaching the right, the language, families are
> willing to come from pretty far away to participate in our programming because it's in

their language, and it's the things they want for their children. (Teodora interview,

November 13, 2020).

In her interview, Giselle described how she met Abril giving a presentation at the Mexican

Consulate. Before the pandemic, outreach included other community education spaces such as

local Head Start events and local businesses and community spaces such as churches.

The Southwest hub is an active community of Spanish-speaking families. Teodora leads

the hub, and a variety of contracted and volunteer facilitators deliver literacy programs. The

mothers interviewed described the importance of the community, both before and during the

pandemic. In the next chapter, I will introduce Octavia and community members from the

Dexter-Linwood hub.

Chapter 5: The Dexter-Linwood Hub

The Neighborhood Strong location in the Dexter-Linwood neighborhood is located on a tree-lined residential street in a 3,000 square foot brick home built in 1924. The house, and those surrounding it, reflect the American Foursquare (like a Craftsman) design, that was popular at the turn of the 19th century and is evident in many of Detroit's historic neighborhoods. The raised concrete porch extends from the front door to the space in front of the three living room windows each of which boasts a decorative concrete quatrefoil with floral details above it. Above, there is a balcony and second story windows covered with weathered awning adorned with a scalloped valance hanging one story above the porch. One more story up, centered on top of the roof is a dormer with a window in the highest level of the three-story home. The one-car driveway intersects with a large wooden privacy fence that contains an expansive, grassy backyard and detached garage. The hub is just down the road from the historic Boston-Edison district, where some of the wealthiest Detroiters of the early 19th century, like Sebastian Kresge, Henry Ford, and Horace Rackham, built their homes.

Figure 5.1

Photograph of the Dexter-Linwood hub

Today, the Boston-Edison neighborhood continues to be one of the most well-maintained

neighborhoods in the city with houses selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars (according to

Zillow, the aforementioned Kresge's 1914 estate is for sale for 3 million in January 2022),

whereas the Dexter-Linwood hub was purchased for around $30,000 in 2017. An even larger

multi-family brick home next door to the hub is one of the tens of thousands of Detroit homes

that are vacant and in disrepair. Blight across the city, in the form of both residential and

commercial properties, has been an ongoing challenge for neighborhood residents. In 2011,

President Obama brought national attention to the issue when he formed a federal-local

partnership with Detroit. The home next to the Dexter-Linwood hub is part of a larger issue in

the city as described in the White House report, "The community-led Blight Task Force

identified 85,000 blighted/vacant properties posing environmental and public safety risks" (p. 4).

In the ten years since the beginning of the project, millions of city, state, and federal tax dollars

have been spent on demolishing, and sometimes restoring, vacant and dangerous properties

across the city. A research report by The Urban Institute entitled "The Detroit Housing Market

Challenges and Innovations for a Path Forward" describes the decades-long systemic

deterioration of many Detroit neighborhoods:

"Due to decades of disinvestment, population loss, and exclusionary housing policies,

Detroit's housing market had experienced distress before the Great Recession. Since

then, persistent poverty has helped perpetuate the market's distress and contribute to the

concentration of neighborhood poverty, which has profound and long-term effects on

residents' outcomes. Notwithstanding Detroit's affordability, nearly 70 percent of Detroit

renters pay more than 30 percent of their incomes for housing because of their relatively

low incomes. Detroit's bankruptcy and the recession have further disrupted the housing

market."

Across the street from the hub is a cultural icon: Detroit's old Central High School building. This

school, opened in 1858, was the very first Detroit High School (the first in the state of

Michigan). Central High School (also called Capital High School when it was housed at the

former state capitol building) dealt with the city's major population growth, moved to this

current location in 1926 just two years after the Dexter-Linwood home that would become the

hub was built. The high school served as a staging area for the National Guard when they came

into the city during the 1967 Uprising. The National Guard was sent to Detroit again the next

year, on April 4, 1968, when the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sparked riots in

over 100 cities across the country. The photo below shows Central High School acting as a base

for National Guard vehicles getting ready for patrol on April 7, 1968.

Figure 8

Photograph of National Guardsmen Ready to Move Out for Street Duty in Detroit, Central High

School, April 7, 1968

Note: Photograph from Riots and Protests, Detroit 1967, General Photographs Collection, Michigan State Archive

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the ongoing population loss from the 1950s into today has devastated the school system. Central was bursting at the seams in the '50s but today the massive building houses the small group of high school pupils on just one floor of the building, with Durfee Elementary and Middle School occupying the other floors.

Dexter-Linwood Hub

In the following sections, I will use the interviews and field notes from observations to describe the people of Dexter-Linwood. As a hub that opened in early 2020, the community has grown in a mostly virtual space. The community engagement manager Octavia is soft-spoken and charming. Her presence seems almost formal, her Zoom set up and her clothes, hair, and makeup are all just so. Her British accent stands out in Zoom meetings full of Midwesterners.

I first met Octavia during one such meeting. I was observing a managers' meeting; a collection of managers from each of the eight neighborhood hubs. The group on the Zoom call was made up of eight women of color, six Black women and two Latinx women. Harmony and

Hope (both Black women who will be featured in the next chapter) were part of the Global team and the rest of the attendees represented various neighborhood hubs as Community Engagement Managers, representing the Manager team. Harmony was leading the meeting, which normally began with an icebreaker or community builder. On this day she began hyping up the Dexter-Linwood manager Octavia to do the community-building by saying, "I need some motivation to get through this week, who better than the best-selling author Octavia to get us started" (Manager meeting field notes, September 15, 2020). Octavia, who had just published a book entitled "I am Praying for You", began to do just that for her colleagues in the meeting. She was wearing a button-down collared shirt, her dark hair was twisted into long narrow braids, and her dark lipstick accentuated her broad white smile.

She opened by saying, "I'm just honored to be part of this amazing group of women". Octavia, a trained minister, then proceeded to praise each person individually, weaving comments about personal attributes with highlights of their professional skills. Starting with Teodora, from Southwest, she said: "You're so present with your children." To Maxine, "Neighborhood Strong is where you're being *trained.* Grasp all of it. They are looking at you. Amen." To Harmony, "Thank you for being my personal encourager. Me coming to Neighborhood Strong was not a mistake. God used you that day- is this something you can do? You're in a brilliant space of leadership". To another manager she said, "I love you from the deepest, rawest part of my being. I love how you love your participants. They really appreciate you, you are valued in that space", to another, "God has something out there for you and it will blow your mind. Be patient, don't rush nothing. Sit in that quiet space" and another, "I know you're doing tremendous things. Every single day they come, they're loved and they feel at home. I want you to know you're appreciated", to another, "I see you and I see Superwoman"

(Manager meeting field notes, September 15, 2020). She continued until all eight people on the call were showered with a mix of prayer and praise from Octavia, with varying degrees of reference to Christianity and God.

Afterward, the group reciprocated, Harmony said, "We love you. I need to get my female game together. I don't walk like Octavia," to which Teodora responded, "She's royalty." Maxine reflected, "The power that comes from God, your relationship with God, you shift my day…my week." Another manager responded, "Thank you for always walking in grace and showing us how much confidence you have in your faith" and another said, "You are amazing and anointed as well. I don't let everyone pray for me." Before they wrapped up this community-focused portion of the meeting Harmony exclaimed, "Ohhh, I needed that! I needed to be encouraged and see others!" Hope finished up by saying, "With everything going on we need to remember who we are and *whose* we are. We are so excited for you and so proud of you. That goes for any of you- we know you are not just Neighborhood Strong" (Manager meeting field notes, September 15, 2020). The observation of that first thirty minutes of that Managers meeting, a truly special and uplifting experience to observe, allowed me to see firsthand how Octavia brings her whole self, but specifically her faith and ministry, into her role as a colleague and hub manager.

The Dexter-Linwood location opened in January 2020, just a few short months before all public gathering spaces were shut down due to the Covid-19 surge that overwhelmed the city of Detroit. Because of this, Octavia was not one of the first Community Engagement Managers I reached out to. I was hoping to draw upon the experiences from a hub that had been up and running for longer, with more in-person programming to draw from. After several of the managers declined to participate or respond to my inquiry, I reached out to Octavia. She

responded with excitement, and we began with an interview in April 2021. She described how she came to her position,

> My story is kind of different from the other sites. I actually owned the building that I'm in right now and I was trying to do something similar to what Neighborhood Strong is doing. So before I connected with Neighborhood Strong, I was in this Dexter-Linwood community for two years and I was doing everything out of pocket so it was becoming a strain and it got to a point where I was thinking I would have to shut down and then by divine connection I connected with ....I saw on Facebook a sponsor's ad just pops up on your page. I looked at it and it was just what I was trying to do and Ellen appeared in that video, so I searched for her name on Facebook, and I sent her an email on Facebook. It was in the evening but by the time I woke up the next morning, around 7am in the morning, Ellen had actually responded to me. She had responded to my email so from there we set a time where we met at Larkins, the Neighborhood Strong headquarters, and I shared with her what I had been trying to do with this site. I wanted to get ideas, like how can I find funding, grants, just to get advice from her. To cut the long story short, we ended up partnering with Neighborhood Strong. I sold this property to Neighborhood Strong and that is really how I came on board. (Octavia interview, April 29, 2021)

Octavia's background in ministry led her to this house and this neighborhood and ultimately back to Detroit. Although she lives 50 minutes away in a suburb of the city, she still considers herself a Detroiter. She immigrated to the city from England 25 years ago with her husband and a young son. Later, her daughter was born in a hospital in the city. After her son entered their local public school, it changed the trajectory of their family's life:

I'll tell you the reason why I left Detroit. My son just started first grade and he went through the Head Start program and when he got to first grade, I just noticed everything he knew educationally, I felt I was the one who taught him. All of the knowledge came from home. What mummy was teaching him at home. I approached the principal one day with my concern that I didn't feel like my child was really learning anything from the school. All that he knows, I am the one that is taking the time to teach him. The principal told me, "Well if you're not happy, then leave". So, that is exactly what I did, that's how I left Detroit. I moved to the suburbs. The care was not even there at all at the school level. He didn't try to hide it or come up with solutions, that was what he said, "If you're not happy, leave." So, we left. Maybe now you can see why you can see why I still come back because I don't want...Not every parent has the ability to just leave like that. I could do that but not everybody can do that.

Octavia, drawing upon her own upbringing and culture, describes the importance of education from her perspective. This commitment to education compelled her both from Detroit (for her own children) and back to Detroit (for other people's children):

I am not only Black, but my ethnicity and culture is African, I'm Nigerian. We are very proud people in the sense of, education is everything. Education is very important, and it is drummed in from a very early age. It's your gateway to a better life, to a better future for your own family, for your own children. You have to have good quality education to escape poverty, to escape hardship, so that is something that has been instilled in me from a very young age. I think that drives me, the education aspect. (Octavia interview, April 29, 2021)

Education, for her own family and for the families that participate at her hub is of high value. When I first spoke with Octavia, the Dexter-Linwood Community Engagement Coordinator, Melody, had been promoted to a manager position at a newly opened hub. She was operating the hub on her own. When asked what kid success means to her, Octavia said,

> For me, kid success is doing all that it takes to make sure no child is left behind. Providing all the resources that are needed so that a child is not left behind. Engaging them in such a way that they know that this is just the starting point. One of the kids that used to come here for homework club was saying she wanted to drop out of school, and I just remember looking at her because she is such a gifted writer. This is how I was talking to her, I'm so...I'm so invested in you that I already see myself at your high school graduation. I am going to be at your high school graduation. That did something for her, someone believing in her when she wasn't seeing it for herself. So, kid success is letting every child know that they have it in them to be whatever they want to be and Neighborhood Strong is part of the solution. We are here to do our part to make sure no child is left behind because of their zip code.

In her example of kid success, Octavia talked about creating a vision of the future with one of the children at homework club that expressed wanting to drop out. This is a good example of how Octavia uses relationships to build trust and participation at her site.

Community Member Experiences

As with the previous neighborhood, each of the participants are women and caregivers (all names are pseudonyms). This group of Black women all lived in the city, though, similarly to Southwest, only one lived in the actual Dexter-Linwood neighborhood. The following chart gives some basic information and there is a more detailed overview of their interviews below.

Table 5.1

Basic information about Dexter-Linwood Participants

Name	(Number of children) Age of children	How they found Neighborhood Strong	How long they have been involved	Where they currently live
Danielle	(0) She is an aunt/caregiver to Drea's children	She met Octavia and Melody at a local outreach event through Head Start	1.5 years	Detroit; downtown Detroit
Drea	(3) 6yrs, 3yrs, 6 months	Her sister connected her with the program	1.5 years	Detroit; 10 mins away in the Corktown neighborhood
Prentice	(1) 8 yrs	Referred to tutoring by client at work who met her son	1.5 years	In the neighborhood, a few streets over from Dexter-Linwood hub
Monica	(2) 6yrs, 9yrs	Started at Central location; then Fitzgerald; then Dexter-Linwood	1 year	Detroit; Martin Park neighborhood (Central, Fitzgerald, and D-L are all 7 min drive away)

I arranged to speak with Danielle on Zoom on a sunny August morning. She was enjoying the day off from her job in the Detroit parks and recreation department and was planning to pick up her niece and nephews later for a fun day out. Octavia had told me about Danielle in our very first interview, many months prior, she was an outstanding participant and community volunteer. Danielle talked about bringing her passion for physical fitness to the site through a martial arts class which has been virtual and outdoors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

She spoke sincerely about the importance of routine, particularly bedtime routines, and how during the pandemic she developed a YouTube channel now filled with over 300 recorded bedtime stories from *Dani's Cozy Couch*. She spoke passionately about her love for her nephews and niece and how precious children are. Danielle lives in the downtown area, but she was exasperated by the continually rising rents that are driving long-time Detroiters like herself out of the area. Danielle proudly explained that she is known for this, "people call me Miss Downtown. I'm the scooter lady. I'm the, I'm everywhere lady. Because I'm so connected with the city" Her optimism for her community and her city shined through during the interview, but she briefly teared up recalling her former neighborhood, on the southwest side of the city saying, "my family home no longer stands" (Danielle interview, August 23, 2022). She discussed her future paths, maybe working with Neighborhood Strong or maybe getting her certification to be an early childhood educator. Danielle was the only non-parent I spoke with at either of the neighborhood sites.

Drea is a mom to three young children and an early childhood educator. Her youngest, a baby girl, was born in early 2021, during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. She listed a number of programs both she and her children participate in including BookNook, martial arts, yoga, Mom's Table Talk, and Reading is Fundamental. As an educator, she says she is always looking for opportunities to help someone's child. One of the ways she does that is connecting people to resources, and Neighborhood Strong is a resource she recommends often. Her recommendation for the program was to continue to partner and engage with other organizations,

> They could inform so many more people in our environment because that is really a
> thing, especially in people of color. In our neighborhoods or whatever, a lot of us need
> those connections. Whether it's education, early childhood education or health, or mental

health. That's a whole thing. They be doing it, they be doing it. (Drea interview, September 2, 2021)

Drea is a proud Detroiter and although she does not live in the Dexter-Linwood neighborhood, she is able to name important community spaces including several churches and the nearby Matrix Head Start. She speaks lovingly about the staff at the Dexter-Linwood hub.

Prentice and I connected on the phone for our interview while she was finishing up her home care work. She shared that it was a home care client that recommended Neighborhood Strong for her son. She and her son live a few streets over from the hub. When she first came to the hub, she told Octavia that she needed help with her son's literacy and math. Octavia welcomed them into space and assured them that they had resources to help. She told me that her son is reading so much better since beginning to attend Reading is Fundamental and BookNook programs at the Dexter-Linwood location. Like Drea, Prentice hoped to connect more parents to the program, saying,

> I wish there were ways that we could get more people involved into the program, for the children's sake to utilize the resources, because they are there. A lot of people don't know about it, so I don't know how to get it out more, but I tell people about it all the time. I do. (interview, September 7, 2021)

Prentice has also been involved with Mom's Table Talk program, which has been a helpful space for her as a parent to get support.

Monica has participated at several Neighborhood Strong homes in the past years, living equidistant from Central, Fitzgerald, and Dexter-Linwood in the Martin Park area (there is a new Neighborhood Strong location coming to that neighborhood, too). She was interested in the program because she wants to support her kids growing academically and they have participated

in programs like Stories and STEM, Reading is Fundamental, and Springboard (tutoring). Her children have also participated in arts and crafts and martial arts programs, which she reflected on by saying "I felt like it [martial arts] gave my children a lot of confidence in their self". Monica has taken parent-focused classes about anger management and helping kids control their emotions. She loves the staff and can't wait to be able to do in-person activities.

What is kid success in the Dexter-Linwood community?

The community members who were interviewed shared, in their own words, what is kid success. Similar to the mothers from Southwest, these definitions often revolve around access to resources for families and children.

Table 5.2

Sampling of responses to "what is kid success" by Dexter-Linwood participants

Dexter-Linwood Community Member Participant	Answer to the prompt, "In your own words, what is kid success?"
Danielle	I would describe kid success as just being kind of like a center of the whole family because in life there's an order which life goes, it presents, from birth to when we pass away, and the childhood comes before the adulthood. Kid success is their impact on us as adults, thinking with the child within us to be able to be the influences that they need as they're growing to understand their process and their progress. Kid success is just loving the children, being accommodating to the children, accepting them, understanding them as human beings, whole human beings even as we are as adults. and the beauty of it, for me I love children they're like my therapy. Kid success is just helping children and giving them what they need in their environment because the children are our future.
Drea	I think kid success means making sure that we as parents, or educators, give the necessary tools for our children to have a successful future like reading, writing, math, cognitive, and physical development. Whatever we can instill in these children to make sure they have an amazing future, a successful future,

	that is what we need to be giving.
Prentice	In my own words, it is more so making sure that the children have whatever means necessary to excel to the next level, whether it is academically or life skills because they also teach them life skills and things like that. So just whatever the child needs to succeed in life, period, in my opinion, is what a success thing is.
Monica	Kid success means to me, when the child is happy, when they're finding their passion and doing what they love, what they want to do and when they're just generally being their self, just all about their interest, instead of being forced to do something, just because school says so. I think that's why it's good to be exposed to different things as a child and you could find what you like, and you just grow from there.

The Dexter-Linwood community members I spoke with view kid success in different but overlapping ways. Octavia, Drea, and Prentice reference academics and the development of skills related to school in combination with other factors. Danielle, the only non-parent, talked about loving and accommodating children because it is what they need. Similarly, Monica described creating opportunities to center children by helping them find their passion and do what they love. Octavia, whose children are now adults, is the only person who mentioned a school-based milestone in her discussion of kid success. The community members focus on development, skills, and tools for self-determination.

Success means many things to the community members. Monica, who has "fallen in love" with homeschooling, pushed back on the notion of doing things "just because school says so". Drea, perhaps because she is an early educator herself, explicitly links to literacy by describing reading and writing as tools for a successful future. In the next section, I will review how each of the community members and Octavia described literacy.

Literacy at the Dexter-Linwood hub

Like the mothers interviewed at Southwest, the Dexter-Linwood community members all agreed on the importance of literacy for kid success.

Table 5.3

Sampling of response to "what is literacy?" and "how is it important to kid success?"

Dexter-Linwood Community Member Participant	Answer to the prompt, "In your own words, what is literacy? How is it important for kid success?"
Octavia	I think it's really, really important. I think it's a mainstay. The foundation really has to start from the home. A lot of people are too dependent on the school system doing the work for them, but before the child even gets into the school system, it has to start from the home. And we have so many programs that actually, we just ended a program LENA Start and that's trying to build the child's vocabulary from very, very early on, which helps to stimulate the brain and get it prepared for early childhood learning. It's very important. And we try to incorporate that with our literacy programs, even including the older siblings to get into a habit of reading to their younger ones.
Danielle	Literacy allows you to communicate through your words, through language, both written and verbal. Literacy is so necessary, it's very necessary. Without it, life would be very, very difficult. As they're developing, they're trying to navigate and understand the world around them. When I see the little ones, I always have this quick interaction with babies. If you can read you can navigate. It's just necessary, in order to be able to express, he's only able to do that because I give him those tools. It's so important I can't fathom, I've seen it, and I've really tried hard. I want to become a tutor because it's so necessary.
Drea	The ability to read and write (how does that fit into success) It's definitely needing to read and write. I see personally over the years technology has become a consumption over people's minds and they have stopped paying attention to people's books. It definitely makes a difference, the better you read, the better you speak, the better you speak the better you can learn, you know, the more opportunities you have. You gotta be able to write as well, I've been working on my son on that.

Prentice	Comprehension, understanding. [She told a story about her son's tutor checking for comprehension after they read and rereading with him until he understood.] And I'm like, "No, you don't understand. I really appreciate it." Because she took her time and they were not able to complete everything that she wanted to go over in that session, but I didn't care, because you stopped to make sure that he understood what you were discussing at that time. I'm fine with it. And that meant a whole lot to me.
Monica	Literacy is being able to read and write proficiently, because third grade. I know some kids pause when you're reading and literacy to me is just being able to read fluently, being able to sound out the words, if you're having trouble. I do think so, because I think you need to know how to read and write. Just to read, to understand. Comprehension. I do think that's very important. And then that would allow kids to what you said was, that when a child happy and finding their passion, they're exposed to different things. So literacy is related to that.

The community members and Octavia described literacy in different ways. Octavia underlined the importance of literacy starting very early and, in the home, which might be evidence of her own learning through professional development at Neighborhood Strong. Octavia included the importance of teaching older siblings to begin reading to their younger ones, another example of how she uses an intergenerational lens to think about her work. Danielle described literacy as a tool to navigate the world and emphasized the necessity of assisting babies and children with developing the tools of literacy. Drea and Monica focused on the ability to read and write specifically. Monica also referenced "third grade" and the ability to "read fluently" and "sounding out the words" as important. Monica and Prentice noted the importance of comprehension and understanding as part of the reading process and Monica also connected to the idea of literacy as a tool to find your passion.

Everyone agreed that literacy is important for success and thought about it in varied ways. Octavia focused on the family and cultivating an early language environment, Danielle

referred to literacy as a way to navigate and understand the world, Drea connected reading, speaking, and learning to more opportunities. Prentice reflected on her child's tutor ensuring that they understood what they were reading.

Some of Octavia's language echoed the dominant deficit storylines about African American parents when she says some people are "too dependent on the school system doing the work for them", which she followed with connection to the LENA program, notable for its deficit-orientation to families (Kuchirko, 2019). Danielle's discussion of literacy was reminiscent of sociocultural theories of literacy that recognize literacy learning as a tool for navigating within communities and families. Monica's view of literacy most closely represented features of school-focused success including naming specific skills and "third grade" as an important checkpoint for children, demonstrating the influence the norms of schooling even though she had pushed back against schooling when she spoke about success and that she and her family were homeschooling and experiencing school outside of the traditional structure.

In the next section, I will share the findings from literacy observations at the Dexter-Linwood hub.

Literacy program observations

The specific titles and hours of observations are in the table below. Immediately following the table, I provide further descriptions of the programs not described in the previous chapter.

Table 5.4

Overview of literacy program observations at the Dexter-Linwood hub

Dexter-Linwood Literacy/Language Program:	Facilitator/Support	Number of programs/Time observed

BookNook	Volunteer tutors/ Staff manages program	(3) 4 hours
RIF w/ interns	College student tutors/ Staff manages program	(2) 2 hours
RIF	Rotating staff facilitator/ Staff support	(3) 3 hours
Regie's Rainbow	Rotating staff facilitator/staff support	(2) 1 hour
Stories and STEM	Partner facilitator	(3) 3 hours
Springboard	Partner tutor/staff facilitator	Observation was canceled

Literacy program overviews

The Dexter-Linwood hub had some overlapping program offerings as Southwest. All the

programs were delivered in a virtual format. BookNook is a virtual program which utilizes a

literacy software program guided by a volunteer tutor. Stories and STEM is a science-focused

literacy program which includes a read-aloud story and related hands-on STEM activities

facilitated by a former teacher. These two programs were described in more detail in the previous

chapter.

In the following sections I describe literacy programs that I did not describe in Chapter 4,

Reading is Fundamental (RIF), Regie's Rainbow, and the Springboard Collaborative. A literacy

program I observed through the Dexter-Linwood hub that I did not observe at Southwest is

Reading is Fundamental (RIF). Southwest was not offering the program at the time and I'm

unclear if they ever have. RIF is a national partner and a long-time literacy-focused nonprofit

organization that is well-known for its book give-away programs in schools. The programs at

Dexter-Linwood include a gift of pre-selected books which are turned into weekly one hour

group sessions. I observed one iteration of the RIF program which was facilitated in small groups

with teaching interns from a local university. The other RIF sessions I observed were weekly

programs co-designed and co-facilitated by the local Community Engagement staff of three

participating neighborhood hubs. In the RIF sessions, there is an emphasis on culturally and, at

times, linguistically diverse, high-quality texts and activities including dancing, writing, drawing,

and crafts.

Octavia described Regie's Rainbow to me as a literacy class and invited me to observe.

Despite having some literacy components, the program more likely falls into the "health"

platform of offerings. According to the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan website,

Regie's Rainbow is an 8-week nutrition course designed for early childhood learners

(https://www.nkfm.org/regies-rainbow-adventure). In these observations I was able to get an

understanding of the program and familiarity with the facilitators and families.

Springboard Collaborative is a one-to-one tutoring program that also offers a family

component. I was very interested in observing the program because it had the one-on-one,

individualized tutoring feature of Center for Success or BookNook, but was unique because the

program employs paid and trained facilitators. A feature of the program is weekly family-

focused class where the facilitators teach and coach adult caregivers while they do literacy

activities with their children. Attempting to schedule observations for any of the one-on-one

tutoring was a challenge. These programs were often organized by global team members or

partner organizations and facilitated by individual tutors. It took me several emails to even

identify who was the contact person for Springboard, a challenge that pointed to the often-

disconnected nature of the program-affiliated staff on the organization's global team with the

community engagement managers' team.

Findings from Dexter-Linwood literacy program observations

The literacy observations at the Dexter-Linwood hub began in April and lasted until early June. During this time, I attended several BookNook tutoring sessions, two RIF sessions featuring student interns from a local university's teacher preparation program, and three sessions of Stories and STEM. I also observed Regie's Rainbow and RIF sessions which were facilitated by the neighborhood community engagement managers of two other nearby hubs that had been pooling their resources and facilitating programs together with Dexter-Linwood.

Facilitation

The programs I observed had a variety of goals and facilitation formats. The Stories and STEM program was run by Fran, the former private school teacher. Her programs were tightly constructed, visually impressive, and moved along at a brisk clip. Time was carefully planned and executed. While sharing her Zoom screen, she moved from PowerPoint to whiteboard to show the pictures for the book she was reading under the project camera. My field notes said, *"teacher-like vocab and visuals"* (observation field notes, May 5, 2021). As she guided the four attendees, all Black children, and their assisting adults through kite building she engaged them in the process. When a kindergarten child, Craig said, "It look like an airplane" she responded, "that's a good observation." As the group is assembling the materials Fran noted, "I'm noticing you're looking at the pictures while you work. That helps". In my field notes I wrote, "feels ambitious" as I watched her explaining the multi-step kite folding with a slideshow displaying each step as a photograph. After they constructed their two versions of the kites, one with a tail made from a skewer or a straw, she posed the question, "why does the tail help them?" At this point she switched to a slideshow of birds with long tail feathers and the group discussed how they think they may help the bird- and how that might apply to the two kites. As Fran explained the activity, she seemed to deliberately use some of the academic language of science,

"controlling the variables-we do that in science", "let's make some guesses, predictions", "you're doing a test, that's what scientists do", and later, after they returned from flying their kites, "your hypothesis was correct"(observation field notes, May 5, 2021). It was notable that Fran addressed several of the parents and grandparents by their names. This indicated Fran had developed relationships with family members' by learning names, inviting them into the program by asking for support, by giving tips during the program, and by warmly welcoming and saying goodbye to each participant, a strong feature of family engagement but it stops short of critical engagement strategies such as including parents in decision-making or power-sharing (Mapp, 2012; Barajas-Lopez and Ishimaru, 2016) This program ran on-time and was smooth for the participants, even with the complicated virtual kite-making directions. From an academic lens, the objectives were clear, and she aligned the read aloud and discussion into a STEM-focused theme. Children had opportunities to engage their prior knowledge, share their thinking, and explore the STEM themes with hands-on activities.

In contrast, in observing the programs that were facilitated by the team of community engagement staff, the findings indicate some significant challenges for the smooth implementation of programming. First, I will note that Fran is a retired educator with decades of pedagogical and content knowledge and experience for facilitating a STEM-focused class. As I will talk more about in chapter 6, community engagement staff are hired for their relationship-building skills and not for their knowledge and experience teaching literacy programs. The programs that this team co-facilitated, Regie's Rainbow and RIF, presented challenges for the facilitators and for the attendees.

Regie's Rainbow, as I stated earlier, is not technically a literacy program at all, but it does include some of the features of a family literacy program: a read aloud, a riddle, a

discussion, and a drawing activity. The team of facilitators, Octavia, Toya, Martin, and Mel often outnumbered the participants of the programs that were supposed to be offered across their three neighborhood sites. The facilitators are all Black (three women and one man) and they represent three sites, Toya and Martin worked together at one: Octavia at Dexter-Linwood, and Mel at a newly opened hub in a nearby neighborhood. On this day, there were four children in the Zoom meeting, three Black girls and one Black boy. The facilitators began by showing a YouTube video of a White woman reading about Regie's Rainbow Adventure- a weekly trip in which Regie, a muscular stalk of broccoli wearing a superhero cape travels to different islands named for colors. On this day he was visiting the Island of Orange. The facilitators ask what could be there? In front of his camera, Martin held up an orange bell pepper and Toya held up an orange. The group brainstormed orange produce: peaches, cantaloupe, tangerine, papaya, squash; they asked children to draw orange fruits and veggies on their papers. "We're growing squash this year," Octavia said, connecting the lesson to the garden at the hub. Toya, who had been leading the group put on a video entitled, "How to Draw Beautiful Orange." In my field notes I wrote "step-by-step video, Black artist" in contrast to the White woman in the read aloud. In this case, the lesson was quick, and followed the outline they likely received from the partner organization.

This same group designed and co-facilitated a six-week RIF program which I observed on May 10, 2021. This time, it was just Octavia, Martin, and Mel. It seemed as though there had been more participants in previous weeks, but it's unclear if participation was generally low during the pandemic or just for this program. Martin said, "I don't know where all our participants are?" for several minutes there was only one participant on. Octavia noted that "Toya is out for the week on vacation-wondering if that is why no one is connecting." The

program, slated to start at 5, began at 5:14 with a review of the week before the theme of "I am Loved" which Octavia displayed on the screen.

Figure 5.3

Screenshot of Google Slides from the RIF literacy program displaying "I am Loved" activity
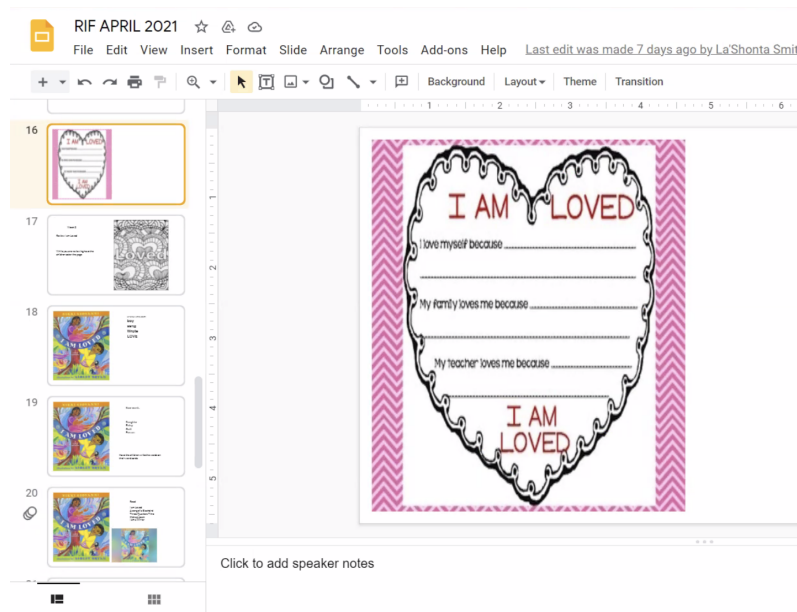
Octavia asked the questions from the page, *Why do you love yourself?... My family loves me because…*; the children attending the program, two Black boys in upper elementary school are not answering but the co-facilitators are filling the silence with their participation. Octavia goes onto the next part of the plan: saying the previous vocabulary words (boy, sand, wrote, love) and writing them down for several quiet minutes. The next step was introducing and writing the vocabulary words for this week, "daughter, rainy, quilt, person". By this time, it is 5:25, Octavia asks Martin to read a poem entitled "Quilts" and then she asks, "Does everyone know what a quilt is?". Neither of the boys on the call answer, so she explains in her own words. While this is happening, one of the children retrieves a quilt from somewhere in his home and holds it up to the camera for a couple of minutes. None of the facilitators seem to notice and no one says anything about this in-the-moment connection between the theme and new words of the week

and this child in his home which was a missed opportunity for interaction, connection, and culturally responsive instruction. After the writing is finished, the facilitators read two more poems from the Afro-centric collection "I am Loved" by Nikki Giovanni, illustrated by the famous Ashley Bryan. The poems, full of powerful expressions are never discussed with the participants or even unpacked between the facilitators, it felt like a missed opportunity for making culturally relevant connections between the words and paintings and the lives of the participating children. Somewhat abruptly, Octavia presses play on the video in the PowerPoint, and she declares, "now we'll spell sight words at Fortnite". The next several minutes are spent with this video of dancing characters spelling words rhythmically.

Figure 5.4

Screenshot of Fortnite high frequency word video used during a virtual literacy program
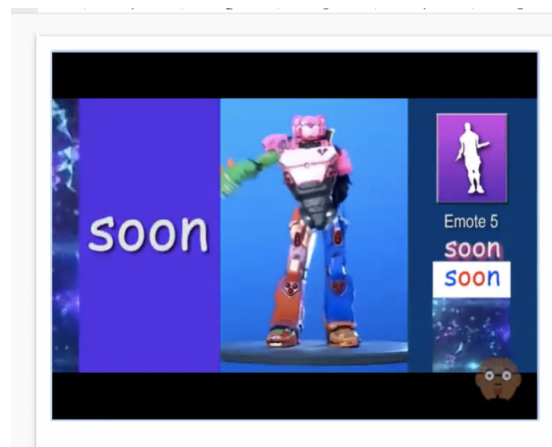
One of the children turned their video off. The other is sitting on the floor, with his side to the camera, rocking back and forth. The video continued for about five minutes. When it ended Octavia said, "Did that get you going a bit? It's fun to play with words and learn how to spell words with music". The boys did not respond to that, but one boy came off mute and said, "This is a quilt", and attempting to connect the lesson to his prior knowledge, a goal of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). He had been waiting to connect to the new word, the poetry,

the substance of the day. Martin replied, "oh yeah!" and Octavia said, "oh, yes". Then, they moved on to an announcement about the next week. On paper, the day's lesson had substance, especially the book of poetry. Unfortunately, the facilitators, who are not trained literacy educators, weren't able to make those pedagogical connections during this virtual call to fully utilize the materials and the relationship moves leaving the lesson feeling disconnected and unidirectional.

Volunteer Skills Varied

The BookNook sessions I observed through the Dexter-Linwood tutors differed from the Southwest hub because there was only the English format, no Dual Language options. All of the children I observed (always with the consent of the nearby adult caregiver) were Black English speakers. I do not know if there were any multilingual students or family members. The tutors included two White female college students, a White teenage male, and a young White woman. In many of the cases, the children began with enthusiasm while the game-like features of the program drew them in. Later, there was a quick vocabulary lesson and quiz that the tutor facilitated according to the prompts on their "guide" screen.

It was evident the tutors were following a script on their screen, but it was interesting they were unable to see with the student screen. It greatly limited their ability to engage with the students' mistakes in an informed way. Some of the tutors remedied this situation by asking the children to share their screen but others did not.

An interesting tutoring pair was Kory, a young Black boy likely in kindergarten or first grade, and his tutor, Kevin a White teenager, possibly a highschooler. The pair read a book together called "Play Ball". When Kevin introduced the book using the script, Kory added, "I play baseball!". Kevin continued with his script, "What other sports use a ball?" and Kory

answered, "basketball, football, golf…". Kevin said, "yep", and proceeded to read the story to Kory. Afterward, Kevin asks, "what was the book about" to which Kory gave a classic, long-winded young child answer, weaving details and events over a minute or so, "they were playing ball and they were ready and then the boy fell and then they went…" to which Kevin responded with a quick acknowledgement and moved to the next question on his screen, "Ok! What was your favorite part?". Kory said, "I liked when the boy helping him. Helping is kind of good for people". From my teacher's perspective, a sincere acknowledgement to this heartfelt response would have been appropriate here, but one of the two of them must have clicked "next" and the screen (which I could not see) turned into the next task. Ironically, the next thing Kevin said was, "I can't help you with this part", about some sort of quiz incorporating phonics from earlier in the lesson. Neither Kevin nor I could see Kory's screen when the results of the quiz had been determined. Kevin attempted to engage Kory, who was visibly beginning to lose focus, in reflecting on his mistake. "I'm trying to see where you might have gone wrong. Do you remember which one you chose? I think you might have chosen 't-o-g-e-h-e-r' but you need a 't' before the 'h'…" he trailed off as the young boy wiggled in his seat, stood up, and began spinning around in circles as Kevin began to introduce a new lesson about irregularly spelled words. (Observation field notes, May 19, 2021).

BookNook, from what I understand of the model that Neighborhood Strong was using, has a one-time training and then appears to rely on the program to electronically guide the tutor indefinitely. Kevin, in the previous example, was doing just that, following the prompts. Like any scripted curriculum, the person delivering the messages makes a difference. Although Kevin was ticking the boxes of the tutoring, his interactions did not seem to cultivate any relationship-

or motivation-building dialogue or any chances to really build on what Kory was bringing to the lesson in the form of prior knowledge.

Another example from Book Nook tutoring is that of Natalie, a White woman in her 20s or 30s and Brian, a young Black boy. The first thing I notice about this Zoom call is how friendly Natalie is with Brian's mom who chats with her from somewhere off-camera. When Brian gets into place, Natalie says, "There's the birthday boy! How are you?", indicating her familiarity with the child's life. Brian is quiet but he shares his screen, and I can see what he is working on. The lesson starts with a game titled, Can you Find the Difference? Brian was not interested, he only found 6 out of 12 of the differences between the pictures when he said, "I want to go to BookNook" as he sat back and flipped through a book that was sitting next to him. Natalie noticed this and said, "You have a book there that you're looking at, is that one you can read by yourself? Brian answered, "Not yet", and the tutor replied, "I bet you're getting close!". Brian picks up another book. Natalie says, You've got such a great stash of books today! Rainbow Fish! I love that book!". This small interaction between Natalie and Brian (and his mom) creates a totally different dynamic than the one between Kevin and Kory. Natalie interacting with Brian and his mom demonstrated an attention to relationship and responsiveness beyond the computer lesson which stood ready to be clicked: awareness of his recent birthday, warmth and encouragement related to his specific struggles, connection between his home book collection and her own taste in books aligned their shared identities as readers.

When they begin the book "Cake at the Lake", in which the main character Nate is a child with an afro hairstyle and large dog companion, who needs to take a big cake to a lake. Brian seems daunted by the task of reading the text and asks Natalie, "Can you read the first page?", to which she answers, "Sure, we'll alternate. I'll go first and you go second." In my

field notes I wrote, *Pg 5, struggling, withdraws, covers eyes.* (Observation field notes, May 19, 2021).

Figure 5.5

Screenshot of BookNook lesson featuring the book "Cake at the Lake"
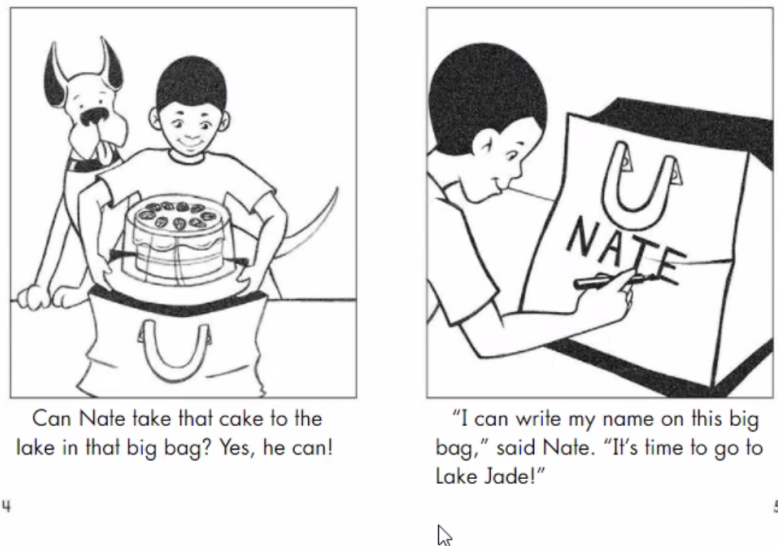
Natalie ended up reading most of the text, despite their early agreement to take turns. She followed the BookNook prompting by asking, "Tell me what you thought of the book?" Brian gave a thumbs down and Natalie added, "What would make you like it better?" to which Brian responded, "If I could read the book". Natalie added, "You can read it. We're just pushing ourselves with a little bit of difficulty." In my field notes I wrote, "*Natalie is a lovely tutor: patient, kind, empathetic*; *I wonder who has control over the level of text?*". This wondering is related to Natalie's awareness of the difficulty of the text in relation to Brian's ability. Does BookNook allow for the tutor to make changes or adapt the text based on how the child is interacting with the material? Does the tutor know how to do that? Or is the software ultimately in control?

The computer screen prompted Brian to select an emoji face that corresponded to how he felt about the lesson. He selected a heart-shaped eyes emoji, which was inconsistent with what I had seen and what he had expressed verbally to his tutor, but the computer program will never know that.

BookNook is one program that is intended to meet the demand for one-on-one tutoring for elementary aged children in the neighborhood. I found that the person guiding the child through the lessons mattered for what happened during the lesson. It's an example of how one literacy program can be at times aligned, and at other times misaligned, with the relationship-focus of the organization.

Community Member Experiences with Programs

The Dexter-Linwood participants I spoke with reflected on their experiences with the literacy programs through Neighborhood Strong. Unlike Southwest, where there was a strong link throughout all of the interviews to one-on-one tutoring, at Dexter-Linwood the community members reflected on BookNook tutoring but also RIF and a foundational literacy program at Neighborhood Strong called Raising a Reader. Raising a Reader is a national partner to the organization that is focused on creating family routines around book-sharing and improving access to books in the homes of young children. Danielle came from a different perspective and reflected on how she designed her own literacy program that Dexter-Linwood featured on their programming calendar: Dani's Cozy Couch.

Each of their reflections are in the table below.

Table 5.6

Sampling of Dexter-Linwood participants reflecting on literacy experiences

Dexter-Linwood Participant	Discussing literacy experiences
Dani talking about her virtual bedtime story program Dani's Cozy Couch	But the literacy thing is so important, because I'm seeing them thrive. I'm seeing my nephews thrive, because I read to them. In the spirit of reading them those bedtime stories, ease them into that process. If you just telling them to get to bed, that's not, for them, an easy transition as a child. We have to take them through the process. And for them it's something that they should look forward to and not be upset about it, like, "Okay, kids it's time to go to bed." "Oh, man." The "Oh, man," will be there, but when they know what they have to look forward to, oh, they're going to have an awesome bedtime story, or storytelling time before we go to sleep.
Drea talking about RIF	I have an example of something that we learned. Well, yeah, was it Reading Fundamentals? I think it was Reading Fundamentals. They were working on positive affirmations, actually. They would write them, or they picked, I think they picked three and wrote the sentence or what not, something like that. My son actually learned about that, you know what I'm saying, and was able to apply that to his lifestyle. The ones he picked up were, I could ask for help and what was the other one? I can be a good friend, I believe. I found that that was a help because some of these kids, including the kids that I know in our programs. They need to adhere and know stuff like that. It was beneficial in that way of trying to help him know that he can be a good friend, you know what I'm saying?
Monica talking about BookNook and RIF	I liked Book Nook, and I think my kids enjoyed it really. …And, but she [her third grader] would come, tell me the word that she learned for the day or the week. And she would be using it and my kindergartener, he was loving his tutorer. Yeah. So, they sit and read with them, and they would help them with the words…But I think it helps my kids a lot. It's all virtual…I believe younger kids do learn a lot through play.

Prentice talking about BookNook	And then the help of Neighborhood Strong was a lot, because of the tutoring sessions. He's reading so much better now, since first coming on with them, so I really, really appreciate the program. He loves his tutor. She was so cute, Ms. A. She's so funny. And Ms. Melody, that was one of his favorites as well. But he would just, when he gets off the phone, off the meeting with her he would say, "She's pretty cool, Mom." I'd say, "She is?" "She kicks it with me." The tutors are kind of young, so he's like, "Okay, cool. It's not an older person." He was all for it and asking her all kind different questions. And "Oh, you're in college? Well, what are you doing in college?" I just thought it was kind of cute.

Altogether, Prentice and Monica talked about their children's experiences with the BookNook tutoring program. Monica said her children enjoyed it a lot and said play as important to learning- I believe she was referencing the many games (some literacy, some not) that BookNook uses throughout a lesson. Prentice referenced the relationship her son had with the facilitators and tutors, specifically that the tutor is young and "she kicks it" with him. This points to a range of experiences between students and their tutors based on this one program.

Drea focused on an interesting piece of the RIF program, that the program had been working on positive affirmations with the children, which she felt was particularly positive for kids, and not just her own kids. In her phrasing she included a sense of community- "kids that I know in our programs", which demonstrated a sense of ownership over the programs and an awareness of the interconnectedness of her own children and those of her neighbors.

Drea also reflected on the influence of RIF and Raising a Reader in how her family emulates some of the practices they have learned in those spaces: spending time reading together, having conversations about books, and drawing in response to the text.

Danielle discussed her literacy program and how that was directly connected to creating routines and supporting kids and families during what can be a tough time of the night- bedtime. She enlisted the help of the local library who agreed to allow her to check more books than normally allowed so she can keep up with her nightly broadcast. When we spoke, she had over 300 bedtime videos uploaded into her personal YouTube channel.

Community connection

Across the Dexter-Linwood participants, there was a sense of gratitude for the resources and sense of community that Neighborhood Strong brought to the neighborhood. The following quote is a lengthy response from Danielle following the question, "how would you describe the Dexter-Linwood neighborhood". I include this quotation, despite its length because of the substantive sociopolitical analysis Danielle includes. Her words reflect her own critical understanding of how the prolonged neoliberal policies encouraged disinvestment in neighborhoods, schools, and the lack of basic services like trash pick-up and water across the residential areas in order to privatize and monetize instead of maintaining spaces for the greater good. Meanwhile, other parts of the city, namely the Downtown and Midtown areas received inequitable investment, attention, and gentrification. Danielle lives downtown and describes how both investment and disinvestment have affected her. She says,

> Weaving about, throughout that neighborhood. Lots of homes, always room for
> improvement. Because, the city, we're thriving downtown here, 'corporate Bill' here.
> Yeah. I have a love-hate relationship with that, but it doesn't fall into these communities,
> and if Neighborhood Strong is able to get that support from Quicken loans, I think there
> was a connection with Dan Gilbert, maybe it was computers. Putting the computers at the
> site or something, technology hubs. So, I'm like, "Okay, see if you are going to reach into

neighborhoods, and if you're gon' help out, I feel a little bit better about the fact that you

making downtown Detroit look like the whole city within a city. But then don't go into

one of the neighborhoods, and then it's a war zone in comparison to what I see daily.

Here Danielle is referencing her Downtown living with the garbage, unkempt lawns, and tens of

thousands of blighted properties prevalent in neighborhoods across the city. She continued,

Like Southwest Detroit on my end [her childhood neighborhood], on the far end as I

described it Ecorse and Melvindale. But my family home no longer stands. When I

moved to downtown, that first year was me commuting back and forth to make sure my

mom was okay, because things were going downhill there.

If it's 313 (Detroit's area code), and if it's any zip code in the 313 area, it all

should be under the same umbrella, keep that same energy. You know? This whole

gentrification thing makes no sense to me in Detroit, whether it's Eight mile (a street that

acts as a northern border of the city), or rather it's Shaefer (a major north-south roadway

in the middle of the city). Okay? Or Outer drive (street name) it don't matter. Whether It's

Connors (street name) on the east side, it's all the same. And it should be treated with that

same love, care and energy, and that same pride. Meijer's (a major grocery store in the

region, but not in the city) you want to open up? Go ahead and open up in the city of

Detroit. Walmart, come on down.

Here Danielle is referring to the dearth of grocery stores in the city of Detroit, which had

suffered from the steady closure of supermarkets throughout the 1970s-2000s. "By 2010, the city

of Detroit had roughly one major supermarket for every 71,000 residents" (LeDoux & Igor

Vojnovic (2021). Notably, one of the only stores in the city is also in one of few Downtown

spaces that is getting the lion's share of redevelopment. The high-end Whole Foods Market was

the first grocery chain to open in the city in 2011. Danielle is welcoming Meijer (currently there are two: one opened in 2013 and the other in 2015) or Walmart (there are none) into the non-downtown neighborhoods. She continued,

> I can't wait to see 10 years from now, what Neighborhood Strong is. I can't wait to see five years from now–two years from now–because so far, they're really on the up and up. But describing that neighborhood [Dexter-Linwood], it does remind me of when I lived in Southwest Detroit, and I lived there 30 years of my life. And then the rest of the time I've been down here. And I did, I said all that to say, I did that, cause my neighborhood was unfortunately going down…But yeah, it's kind of bittersweet, because I cry when I go down my old block. I'm just not seeing it. (Danielle interview, August 28, 2021).

As Danielle reflects on her neighborhood and on the inequitable investment in Detroit, she names: Dan Gilbert. The Quicken Loans founder is a Michigan billionaire whose wealth skyrocketed over 600% during the pandemic from 6.5 billion in 2020 to 51.9 billion in 2021, landing him a spot as the 23rd richest person in the world according to Forbes World's Billionaires list 2021 (https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/). Danielle called out gentrification, neighborhood disinvestment, and she became emotional as she described how those forces impacted her life and childhood neighborhood.

I asked, "Do you see Neighborhood Strong as an organization that's investing in neighborhoods?" and Danielle answered, "Absolutely. And I greatly appreciate that they understand that they bring in the resources and the connection to neighborhoods that don't have that easy connection" (Interview, August 28, 2021).

I appreciated Danielle's ability to contextualize not just the Neighborhood Strong program but the neighborhoods within the city. She described the multimillionaire Dan Gilbert's

efforts in building up Downtown as, "making downtown Detroit look like the whole city within a city". As a community member with lived experience both in the investment-rich downtown and in the oft-neglected neighborhoods, she brings an important perspective to this study- Danielle engages in critical analysis of how inequitable systems that have shaped her and her family's life in various parts of the city (Pedroni, 2011). She was the only community member to bring such a perspective during our interviews. She named the tensions that exist in accepting materials or money from a billionaire who has not shown care and attention to the people in neighborhoods of Detroit She invites the investment from Gilbert and supermarkets into all parts of the city in order to serve the community.

Family Engagement

As with all the Neighborhood Strong hubs, family and community engagement is very important at Dexter-Linwood. Some of the examples of this include weekly distribution of food, programs such as Meet Up and Eat Up that bring community together for meals, the intergenerational outreach that Octavia championed beginning with the early days of the pandemic.

When I asked community members about some examples of the ways they see the hub as engaged, Drea said,

> I just went to the Meet Up and Eat Up. I pulled up one day and I see Miss Octavia just handing out lunches to other kids in the community. Just finding kids on the street, not on the street on the street, but you know, in the neighborhood or what not. She gave them lunches and they do stuff like give away coats and stuff. Everybody just pull up type thing. It's very comfortable. They are definitely involved in the community. (Drea interview, September 1, 2021).

Danielle reflected on the feeling of being engaged and belonging, saying, "You feel like this is your space. You're supposed to be there. Nobody's looking at you like, 'Where did you come from and why are you here?' It's welcome, welcome, welcome." (Danielle interview, August 28, 2021). The feelings of belonging and welcome that families feel are hallmarks of family engagement.

Engagement includes the personal relationship building that is part of the community engagement manager role. When I asked if her experiences support that Neighborhood Strong staff build relationships, Monica reflected on that, "Yeah, I think so. I think I have a personal relationship with, I will say Octavia because yeah, we text. And when she text me, like if they have something coming up and just let me know if I'm interested. Or they all look out for the older kids as well". At another point in the interview she said, "So I think they're always caring, and they always look out for me. They'll text me like, 'Hey, are you interested in this?' Or 'I have this for you.' I think that it's very thoughtful, just to think of me. And then Octavia really went beyond and looked out for me" (Monica interview, September 9, 2021).

In response to the same question about staff building relationships, Prentice said, "Oh, absolutely. And they encourage it. On the Mom Table Talk, a few of us are doing, 'Okay, well hey, we need to hook up and do this and do that with one another and share stories to help one another.' Yes, I would absolutely, absolutely. I told them, I said, 'I got some new friends. This is so cool. I got new friends.' (Prentice, September 9, 2021).

Neighborhood Strong Dexter-Linwood with Octavia in a leadership position, creates opportunities to fulfill the basic needs of community members, establish a space of safety and belonging, and build relationships between the staff and also between neighbors all of which is important in engaging families in the educational space (Stefanski et al., 2016).Additionally,

literacy programs were developed in a neutral manner, unresponsive to the knowledge and culture of the community, resembling autonomous notions of literacy (Street, 1994).

Similar to the findings about the Southwest hub, community members had expansive views of success and literacy goals for their children. Like Teodora, Octavia focused on developing warm and trusting relationships with the community members. Unlike Southwest, the Dexter-Linwood site did not have multiple staff supporting the Community Engagement Manager, but Octavia frequently collaborated with other hubs to deliver literacy programs. Unlike Southwest, the community members did not report a focus on specific linguistic and cultural responsiveness but instead talked about the ways they felt supported and cared for by the staff at Neighborhood Strong.

In the next chapter, I will zoom out of the neighborhood spaces and overview the findings related to the umbrella organization including perspectives, observations, and documents related to the global and manager staff positions and how they support literacy programs at the hubs.

Chapter 6: Exploring the Culture of the Organization

After exploring the two neighborhood locations and the community members' perspectives in chapters 4 and 5, in this chapter I zoom out to look at the findings from umbrella organization, including staff and leadership, that supports those hubs. The chapter will describe the organizational culture including the overlapping structures and the related systems built to support features of the organizational culture and how they support (or not) the neighborhood hubs. I present findings about loving, learning, and leading within Neighborhood Strong and describe how the organization's culture and structures function together in order to deepen relationships that move its mission forward. I present my findings in each of the sections (loving, learning, and leading) and describe how the culture and structures function together in order to deepen relationships that move the mission of the organization forward.

The Southwest and Dexter-Linwood neighborhoods are supported and sustained by the larger umbrella organization and a team dedicated to creating the conditions for neighborhood hubs to function through stewardship, programming, fundraising, development, and other leadership and support roles. I sought to explore the culture of the organization, including the structures and systems that support all the functions of the neighborhood programming, outreach, distribution, staff development, and more. In this chapter I answer the "What is kid success?" question from the perspective of the global team members and address how they describe how literacy and success are interrelated. Next, I focus on answering the third research question,

"What organizational culture and structures support or limit the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of kid success and literacy?"

The headquarters of the organization is in the same building as the Southwest hub, with Ellen's office situated on the ground floor in a sunny corner room with high ceilings and stained-glass windows. The rest of the organization-level offices, known as the global team, are upstairs in the former dormitory section of the building.

Figure 6.1

Photograph of the Neighborhood Strong Headquarters

As overviewed in Chapter 1, the global team includes roles that are not connected to specific neighborhoods, but rather provide an overarching system of support for all the neighborhood hubs. These roles include director and manager positions that oversee departments such as chief executive officer, finance, stewardship, programming, operations, senior community engagement manager, social media and brand ambassador. Between September 2020 and May 2021, I held

two interviews each with nine of the global staff members and several leaders including those

who hold the roles listed in the table.

Table 6.1

Simple organizational chart

Role (name)	Leadership/Global/Both	Neighborhood community-facing role?
CEO	Both	Yes
Senior Operations Manager	Global	No
Senior Community Engagement Manager	Global	Yes
Senior Growth Manager	Global	No
Senior Evaluation and Intake Manager	Global	Yes
Program Manager	Global	Yes
Stewardship Manager	Global	No
Human Resources	Global	No
Board of Directors	Leadership	No
Advisory Board	Leadership	No

Note: This table includes information about if the role is "community-facing" in that the position requires the staff member or leader to interact with neighborhood community members as a part of their duties. For example, the program manager will often interact with community members when they host listening sessions to ask for feedback about programs.

Part I: A Culture of Kid Success

As with the community members, I asked the global team members to share, in their own

words, "what is kid success?", which is a direct correlation to my first research question. In the

chart below are excerpts of their answers, which are notably longer than the community member

answers, likely because they are immersed in the language and discussion of the mission of the

nonprofit.

Table 6.2

Sampling of staff responses to "What is kid success?"

Global Staff Name (pseudonym)	Role in organization	RQ1: What is kid success?
Ellen	CEO and co-founder	Kid success is a neighborhood where everybody is coming together to assure that kids have what they need, the kids and the families. And that means, and this is what you're going to see at our event [referring to the upcoming fundraiser], the grandmother of the neighborhood, the guy in the neighborhood that doesn't have any kids, everybody is gathered around and they are going to take extra care that that's going to happen, and it can happen in the neighborhood. Some people call that what neighborhoods in Detroit used to look like.
Lindsay	Senior Operations Manager	One of the things I love most about Neighborhood Strong, is keeping the kids and families at the center. And so to me, that's what kid success is. Is in keeping kids and families at the center, having them the heart of every decision, of every dream, of every piece of the work that we're doing. Whether it brings glory to Neighborhood Strong or not. At the end of the day, that is what we do, and why we do it.
Harmony	Senior Community Engagement Manager	Setting up the children's environment, their community, with the tools that they need to thrive. That's pretty much it. The tools, the people, the resources, everything they need to thrive, and learn, that's the kid success neighborhood to me.
Ben	Senior Growth Manager	I mean, I think it's truly like the village concept. It's a space where everybody is pooling their gifts and talents and everybody is neighbors. And there's neighbors across zip codes mentality where you might not live on the block, but you're still bringing your gifts and talents. And all of those connect together and create this nurturing atmosphere for children to really self-actualize and grow and be ready for success in however they determine that success to be. And that it is very holistic because everybody brings these different gifts and talents.
Abril	Senior Evaluation and Intake Manager	Kid success is a combination of different factors. If we only measure kid success based on how they are going at school we are taking apart the emotional intelligence. So kid success for me ... All right. Kids that are emotionally intelligent and kids ... I would not say that kid success are good grades. It's more to be

		persistent ... Be persistent. Try harder. Be curious to learn. Be happy. Be kids. Go through every phase without being in a hurry or without pressure. It's to identify their emotions. It's to self-regulate. It's to be motivated. It's to have good relationships with other people. It's to be empathetic. All the components of emotional intelligence...
Hope	Program Manager	Yes. So, kid success to me means that children and families alike are able to thrive and not just survive. So, what's needed for that is collaboration, foundational tools, being able to access those. And trying to level the playing field so that access is given to all. And with the proper tools and resources, any parent is able to provide a healthy, happy, and safe environment for their children.
Olivia	Stewardship Manager	And I like to think of it as like a whole child and a whole family approach. So, if one member of the family isn't successful, then it's going to be hard for the family as a whole to be successful. If there's one area that needs support, or resources, or just anything that's wanted or needed or deserved, then it's going to affect the unit. So, we kind of have a couple different, like, pillars, that we'd call them of kids' success and family success. So, we take into account health, including, like, nutrition, but also just mental health, physical health, emotional health, a lot of different stuff that goes into health. It's pretty wide, but we have health, we have education, and then we have social connection or neighbor to neighbor connections. So obviously, education, we have a lot of programming around that. We do a lot of our work with kids zero to eight, but it totally doesn't end there. We do programming that's for adults, that's for kids in between our age range and adult age, pretty much any age range we're offering educational opportunities, and for neighbor to neighbor or like social connections.

Renata	Part-time Human Resources Staff, Advisory Board member	Kid success is that they're able to read at the level appropriate to their age, and also to excel and be able to compete in schools, just based on statistics they're not even reading at the level they should be. And to support families that...we have a large Latinx community that we participate in, and being able to speak two languages and having that barrier as well as English may be a second language, being able to compete and being able to articulate and support the families and their need to be able to mentor the student and support their child. It's a very integral part, a lot of the times we get so focused just on the children but when they go home to guardians and parents there can be a disconnect of how they are taught to receive or learn so Neighborhood Strong has been really great in involving the parents.
Bruce	Board of Directors	…we talk about children's ability to self-regulate, to learn. We want to help with that, we want to help with the cognitive development of the baby, which you need to be ready to learn. And we talk about being able to connect with other people, trust and be able to have relationships with other people. And I think what we're doing is addressing all of those things. And so, if you have a whole community of people that are able to do those three things, I think everyone thrives. And we always talk about our parents, because this is really mainly about the parents getting the kids ready. And I think if we do our job right, they become much better consumers of education on every level for their kids, and they're more vocal about it, and more demanding, and more like the parents are complaining in the suburbs.
Beverly	Board of Directors	I would say that kid success is a child who is ready to start kindergarten emotionally, as well as intelligently, so that they have the foundations of language, and the beginning foundations of reading under their belt, and is in a connected family situation or living situation. Because a lot of times they're not living with their parents, sometimes they're living with grandparents, or aunts, or whatever. And that family, or that parental structure is engaged in the child's learning, and also engaged and feeling empowered to interact with the school system that they're beginning. They should have expectations for their kids and the school

		system. They should be empowered to voice those expectations. And I think for so long, a lot of these parents, not only felt disengaged from the school system but felt intimidated to ask a teacher for help or resources.

Across most of the global team, kid success was discussed in conjunction with family success and sometimes neighborhood or community success. There is a clear common language of the organization which includes a layered and nuanced understanding of how children develop. Ellen (CEO), Harmony (Senior Community Engagement Manager), Hope (Program Manager), and Olivia (Stewardship Manager) all named the importance of accessible resources for children and families, "everything they need to thrive and learn" in Harmony's words.

In her interview, Abril, the evaluations specialist from Puerto Rico who holds a PhD in developmental psychology, narrowed in on the emotional development of children. Like Maxine and Octavia, Abril, whose husband is a minister, talked about how her Christian religious identity factors into her role. Renata, a lifelong Detroiter and Black woman who is contracted for human resources work, had a response that was a bit of an outlier, including evoking individualized and standardized notions of success, deficit language about kids and families whose first language is Spanish. She names the disconnect in family engagement that is discussed in chapter 2 wherein traditional learning spaces have historically failed to involve historically marginalized families (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Latunde & Clark-Loque, 2016). It's important to note that Renata was a relatively new, part-time, contract employee that was working in a human resources and interpersonal coaching role throughout the organization. This may have contributed to a shallow understanding of the mission and the culture. Whereas the way the others' answers were so similar seemed to indicate a depth of shared understanding

that may point to the importance of the mission in of the and the way the staff has been socialized into organizational culture.

Bruce is a businessman whose Jewish Detroit roots and philanthropic roles led him to focus his entrepreneurial efforts on early childhood. He described kid success as relating to cognitive development, building trusting relationships and connections across neighbors. He also discussed the Neighborhood Strong focus of getting parents ready to be "much better consumers of education" for their children and hoped that the organization would prepare Detroit parents to be demanding, like the parents in the suburbs.

Beverly, who I interviewed at the same time as Bruce, shared his passion and interest for early childhood and education initiatives. She shared during our conversation that her mother had been a schoolteacher in Detroit for many years. In her definition of kid success, she invokes some of the same emotional intelligence skills that Abril noted but with a focus on early literacy skills and a "connected family situation or living situation". Like Bruce, Beverly talked about a goal of parent empowerment in regard to the school system.

Ben, who was one of the first handful of employees, exemplified this deep organizational knowledge in his response. Ben was doing a year of fellowship service with a Jewish organization called Repair the World when Ellen recruited him for a stewardship and grant-writing role for Neighborhood Strong. His organizational knowledge is both foundational from his experience as one of the first staff members; and it is future-oriented, due to his newest role (he's had many) heading up continued development and scaling efforts. He describes kid success neighborhoods as spaces for everyone, "neighbors across zip codes", invoking the larger community, which brings to the foreground the philanthropic nature of the work and how interconnected the organization's success is with their ability to fundraise across and outside of

the city. Ben, like several of the parents in Chapter 4 alluded to, named success as to-be-determined by the child through an ability to "self-actualize". Success, in this view, is the opportunity for children to reach their full potential. It is not only the presence of holistic support including resources for children, their families, and their communities; but it is importantly also the absence of barriers- whether local or societal.

As discussed in previous chapters, the city of Detroit's neighborhoods have never been without barriers. The ups and downs of the city, including decades of housing discrimination, racial discrimination, neoliberal policymaking, housing market crashes, deindustrialization, blight, community spaces, and school closures (Pedroni, 2011; Wilson, 2015) have created persistent *systemic and racialized* barriers to what Ellen referred to as, "what neighborhoods in Detroit used to look like". Ben's definition of success points to this bigger picture-- Detroit neighborhoods as embedded within a larger, unequal society-- and implies that the responsibility for creating spaces for children to exist without barriers does not lie at the feet of individual families in Detroit but requires "neighbors across zip codes" to pool their talent and, not insignificantly, their resources.

In response to inquiries about literacy and kid success, Bruce described his theory of change for the organization,

> The vision that we have is that if you have a utopian scenario, where one of these is in every neighborhood, and you take it to its extreme, one is in every neighborhood, every neighbor is involved in it, every mother, when they're pregnant gets prenatal care, understands the importance of reading to their babies, even when their babies don't seem to have any idea what's going on…and even before they're born. If every mother does that to every baby, the whole city changes in one generation. So that's the extreme. If you

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make every child curious and every child comfortable with books and reading, it just

changes the whole dynamic of the city, and beyond. Hopefully.

In his description of how the organization ideally works, Bruce's language is reminiscent of

Street's (1995) autonomous theory of literacy wherein literacy, in this case coupled with prenatal

care, could the city in "one generation".

Beverly reflects on the importance of literacy to kid success by saying, "I mean, if you

can't read, you can't gain knowledge. And if you can't gain knowledge, you can't grow that far as

an individual". This response reflects a particularly narrow view of what counts as literacy

compared to the International Literacy Association (2020) definition which states literacy is "the

ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible,

and digital materials across disciplines and in any context".

In the next section, I draw upon the hours of observation in managers and global

meetings, interviews with global and manager staff, and organizational documents to answer the

third and final research question: *What organizational culture and structures support or limit*

neighborhood hubs in pursuit of kid success and literacy?

Part II: Organizational Culture, Structures, and Systems:
Loving, Learning, Listening, and Leading

Extensive data from hours spent observing global and manager meetings and

interviewing staff and leaders led me to the following themes about the organizational culture,

structures, and systems supporting them: the organizational culture is loving, there explicit

attention paid to organizational and individual learning through listening, and an emphasis on

servant leadership and how different people enact it. A loving culture built on relationships is

foundational for the organization and is related to the type of leadership that the CEO

exemplifies: servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). This leadership philosophy ensures that the leaders' focus on followers (staff) and community members over every other priority creates a relationship-centric workplace. Culture is operationalized within the structures of the organization. Structures include the way departments, staff, and community participants are set up to interact (or not), along with the organization-wide advisory board structures, and the neighborhood-level advisory boards. These structures influence the way organizational systems function and move information and knowledge between groups of stakeholders.   As an asset-focused learning organization there are systems to ensure there are ways to listen to staff and community and that staff and community share the power to shape the programs and organization.

Loving: Creating Relationships Built on Care, Trust, Safety

In preliminary data collection, I wanted to know how Neighborhood Strong was able to support ongoing family engagement and participation in literacy programs at neighborhood hubs. In the preliminary analysis, I found that there were interesting features of a staff-supportive organizational culture and shared systems of practice for family engagement. Across each of the interview groups: community members, managers, and global team members, there was a consistent mention of love. Community members described their neighborhood hub saying things like, "*amor para las familias*/love for families" (Giselle), "*Lleno de amor y amistad*/Full of love and friendship" (Honoria, Southwest) and the volunteer tutors, "*los tratan con amor*/they treated them with love" (Giselle, Southwest). Danielle (Dexter-Linwood) described the organization's mission saying, "It's loving children and giving them what they need in their environment".

When asked, Octavia (Dexter-Linwood CEM) described her site, "our 'personality', I

would say, is all about love". Ellen (CEO) supported that in a separate interview when she was describing the various neighborhood hubs, "Dexter-Linwood, there's a certain love there that's crazy". Olivia (Stewardship manager) describes the culture as, "It's a very loving and family-oriented place to work. Everyone really cares deeply about each other, about our families, about the work so it's really lovely".

Harmony, a former schoolteacher and a Black woman who lives in a nearby suburb of Detroit. She began as a volunteer and was later hired as a Community Engagement Manager. Most recently, she designed her current position, which had not existed before she suggested it, as a liaison between the Manager and Global teams: the Senior Community Engagement Manager. She reflected on "love" quite a bit across her interviews. At first, she described the organizational culture, "It's very loving, supportive, nurturing, relaxed" (interview September 24, 2020). At the end of her initial interview, I asked if there was anything else she would like to add and she said,

> No, not really. I mean, Neighborhood Strong is not perfect, but it's one of the most…I don't know…I can't even describe it sometimes. It's really loving, like, it's family. I'll call [Community Engagement Manager N] for instance, before we hang up, she'll say, "I love you" even after I told her she didn't take attendance, like that's an example. You know, love, it's like, "Okay, I love you." And I'm like, that threw me off the first time a coworker said that. But even Ellen says it, before she hangs up, and that's like, interesting. But it's well-received and well-appreciated. And it's liked and needed. A lot of people need that affection, and love, and to feel appreciated. (interview, September 24, 2020)

Over the years, I noticed a change in Ellen's sign-off from meetings from "I love you" to "love

love". I am unsure if this change was prompted by staff growth or perhaps by the onboarding of human resources personnel. So, in our follow-up interview, I asked Harmony if and how this feature of the organizational culture may have changed based on the substantial staff growth of the last several years. She responded,

> For those who know each other, we're still close. Ellen still talks to everybody. She still hangs up the phone, "love, love". Ends Zoom calls, "love, love". The culture of love hasn't changed. Now are we frustrated? Do we get mad at each other? Do we want to cuss each other out? Quit? Yep, but we still love each other. (interview, May 19, 2021)

Abril, a global team member describes the organizational culture, starting with a description of the CEO, "[Ellen's] like a big heart with legs. Yes. There is a common factor in all of our staff and it is love. We have a lot of love to give our participants. We love our mission; we believe in our mission. We are committed with people" (Abril interview, September 25, 2020). The way Abril and Harmony describe Ellen's leadership is supported by the literature that connects compassionate love to servant leadership style (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Abril's reflection brings up an important connection to the systems that ensure love is encountered across the organization in such a way: it's embedded in the organizational documents that guide the daily work.

Two internal organizational artifacts I collected, the Programming Guide and the Partnerships Guide, encode the importance of relationships grounded in love and care. The attention to grounding programming in relationships is relevant to the notion of socially constructed, relationship-mediated learning that McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) locate at the individual level of their multilevel sociopolitical framework, as I detail in the next chapter. After talking about the process of developing programs that fit the target age group and align

with the mission of the organization, the Programming Guide names the CED, or the Community

Engagement Department (this group includes the Community Engagement Managers), as a

critical connection between the community and programs.

Figure 6.2

Excerpt from Neighborhood Strong Programming Guide

This gets to the most important part of this whole model: **RELATIONSHIPS**. Families form strong relationships with **CED staff**, who are their primary connection points with Brilliant Detroit. These are relationships of trust and care that create atmospheres of love and safety – the needed ingredients for growth. Families also form strong relationships with one another through participating in programming and programs are strongest when they encourage community connectivity. It is the presence of relationships that make the Brilliant Detroit model successful.

The Partnership Guide described the importance of the more than 90 partners affiliated

with the organization, "Partnerships are the core of Neighborhood Strong's model. We firmly

believe that all have a role to play in promoting kid success in neighborhoods and it is in large

part through partnerships that we coordinate people and organizations to work toward this

common goal." (Partnership Guide, page 1). After detailing the various types of partnerships and

how different departments are involved, the document states, "First and foremost, partnership

holders embody Neighborhood Strong's core values when it comes to building relationships with

partners" (p. 4). Listed below that statement are the core values: 1) Be direct, 2) Care, 3) Solve

the Underlying Problem, 4) Move Mountains, 5) Be Responsive, 6) Share the Spotlight. In

Figure X is the description of the core value "care", used here as an action item.

Figure 6.3

Excerpt from Neighborhood Strong "core values" included in Partnership Guide

> **2. Care**
> We value team members who care. We care about our neighbors and other team members because without them we wouldn't exist. We show we care by listening, getting their input, holding events, and by being present. Caring about other team members is our most important asset. Care enough to show what's working great with other team members. It is also important to care enough about yourself to do a great job and feel the pride of competence.

Across the managers and global meeting observations, I documented in my field notes many instances when people would give their coworkers accolades, something described in another core value "Share the Spotlight". This practice was common but never came across as inauthentic.

Figure 6.4

Except from Neighborhood Strong "core values" included in Partnership Guide

> **7. Share the Spotlight**
> Nothing else can quite substitute for a few sincere words of praise and recognition. Share the spotlight freely and openly. If your team does a great job, make each individual feel appreciated and give them credit for a job well done.

Zelda, is a middle-aged White woman who had come from a career in a corporate environment reflected on the culture shock she experienced related to beginning her role at Neighborhood Strong,

> I remember when I first started, like my first day, Ellen said something about, like, I want to lift up this or I want to lift that up. What is this lifting up? Because I did not have that expression or know what that was at all in my past life. So it was so kind and she's so

uplifting and always making people feel so good. And that's just like a nice unique thing.

(Interview, September 29, 2020)

The commitment across organizational culture and systems for love, in particular, moves beyond the traditional mission or transformation foci of nonprofit organizational culture. Not included in the seminal work of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970, 1977; Spears, 1995, 2010) communal, or agape, love has since been incorporated into the literature (Buck, 2019; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). In my findings love and care are operationalized across the organization and modeled across the leadership and staff.

Organizational Level Systems of Outreach

In order to develop the relationships within the community that sustain the growing model of neighborhood hubs, the organization has systems of outreach that are a key part of its structure. Lindsay is a young White woman who came to the organization through her role in food education and community building. She started with Neighborhood Strong by doing special projects work and has grown into the Senior Operations Manager, a role she noted is not typically done by women. Her operations role situated her outside of direct contact with community members, though she mentioned how it's important to her to attend or volunteer at neighborhood events in order to support hubs. Her organizational knowledge was broad and deep, and she brought an awareness of herself as being from outside of the city. She described the common approaches to engaging with the community, "We have three types of outreach. In the air, on the ground, and hotspot. So, it's social media, other pieces, on the ground, are door-to-door, tabling stuff, and then hotspots would be…it's like a business, a partnered group, a more targeted outreach" (interview, October 28, 2020).

Octavia includes a schedule of weekly personal phone calls to her participants as part of

her outreach,

> And then just, on my calendar I have a phone check-in that I do, just to have that relationship with them also. And I just call them, 'Hey, I'm just calling, how you doing? How was your week?' Those calls are normally Fridays, 'How was your week? Do you need to talk about anything? Know that I'm here.' I just don't want them feeling like it's all about the programming or whatever, I want them to know that, 'Look, I really care about you' (interview, June 10, 2021).

Community Engagement Managers have a lot of freedom in how they decide to attend to the many responsibilities of the hub, including how they choose to reach out to their community. It is an expectation that they are building relationships and creating an atmosphere of love, safety, and growth.

Learning to "operate as a strengths-based organization"

The CEO Ellen says they hire "we hire people full of love and the ability to connect" which means the staff across the organization have varying abilities and skills that they bring to their roles. One way the organization deals with this variation is by utilizing Strengths Finder quiz for all employees and relying on this formal definition of their strengths as well as informal and self-assessments of strengths gleaned through relationships. Octavia referenced the tool in her example of the organizational culture.

> So, I would say that Neighborhood Strong likes to highlight people's strengths. So that's why you use that StrengthsFinder. Highlight people's strengths and also lots of training. So, the culture of Neighborhood Strong is also lots of training, continuous education, always constantly learning, always constantly growing. And as a culture also of moving up, you don't have to remain stagnant, there's opportunities to move to another

department.

Individual strengths identified through an assessment called Gallup's Cliftonstrengths *(formerly known as Strengthsfinder)* seem to be an important common language of the staff. The assessment is a questionnaire that asks about beliefs and behaviors and determines a person's strengths into these four domains: executing, influencing, relationship building, and strategic thinking (Gallup.com, 2022). Some staff even include a list of their own Top 5 Strengths in their email signature, as seen in Figure X.

Figure 6.5

Example of strengths as indicated by StrengthsFinder in a staff members' email signature

Personal StrengthsFinder Top 5
Connectedness | Empathy | Positivity | Developer | Arranger
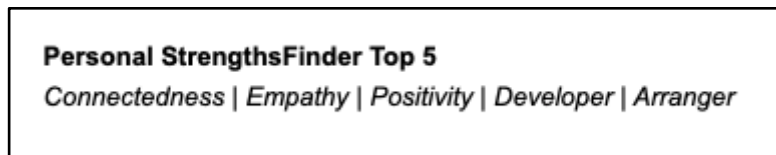
Highlighting staff strengths creates a focus on assets and establishes value in each person and an interconnectedness between the staff. Lindsay said,

> This idea that we work together as a family. In all that though, I would add that, as a community-driven organization, we've got the values, we've got this. We don't always have the tactical skills, which I think is fine. In my opinion, anything can be taught, anything can be learned. But it does play a part in how well and how quickly we can accomplish things. (Interview, September 11, 2020).

As I'm sure many organizations can attest, there is almost always a need for ongoing training and professional development for their staff. Neighborhood Strong makes staffing decisions that will align with their relationship-driven model and relying on their professional development to cover the rest. One way they achieve this is their home-grown learning program.

"Strong University"

Many staff members recalled the difficulty in getting accustomed to technology in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hiring staff members who are connected and loving community members, often from the community, also may mean that they may also have some skill gaps such as the ability to navigate the Google suite and use Zoom for programming. Even before the pandemic, to ensure their staff continue learning and developing, the organization created a catalog of professional development for staff called Strong University. This series of classes and workshops are intended to grow the individual skills of staff members in a variety of ways. Ellen describes the program:

> The idea is that we have a set of training or possibilities that are offered that are personal development, professional development and job specific development, there's three tracks. Renata (human resources/coach) does a lot of that training; we have another person who does training, and we bring people in. And we also ask staff at least once a year what other things, during COVID people felt they needed healing circles, so we thought about it then, or they needed something for healing, so we assign somebody, and we get that done. So, there is a ton of that, it's not just those two weeks, there are things offered all the time because we're a learning organization and we all want to grow. (Ellen interview, September 18, 2020)

In a more informal manner, Harmony, the senior community engagement manager whose position is to supervise the managers and coordinators at all sites, acknowledged some challenges in being distributed across the city. She shared her own approach to staff learning, after shifting from email to the use of a collaborative document to communicate with managers and coordinators:

> It's also building that culture of them talking to each other. That was something that was

missing, because even though we're one big organization, because we're broken down

into sites, people weren't talking to each other. So now, that's another, I've been

encouraging people to talk to each other. This person has this strength, go talk to her.

This person has that strength, go talk to her, or you know, that's her weakness, you have

the strength, go help that person. And that seems to be, it's been working. (Harmony

interview, September 24, 2020).

The strengths focus is also applied to the neighborhood through organization level asset-mapping

which includes naming important spaces in the neighborhood including schools, parks,

businesses, churches, and other community organizations.

Despite the strengths-based orientation, the need remains. Maxine was a community

engagement manager for a hub that I began a partnership with in November 2020 but when I

returned to the field to collect neighborhood level data in March 2021, she had given her two

weeks to the organization. She graciously agreed to have another interview and discuss her

experiences which included her understanding of the barriers for families living in poverty and

how that related to the services Neighborhood Strong was trying to provide to them. She said,

I've always talked about families being in survival mode and trying to connect with

families, even before COVID, a lot of our families that could benefit from our programs

are in survival mode. So, everything that we have to offer, even though it's free, it's seen

as like a luxury. It would be a luxury to take time and attention away from this day-to-day

hustle and bustle that I've got going on for my family to get them some extracurricular

reading activities or physical activity or nutrition activities or, for me, to come and sit

down and talk to you about parenthood issues. (Interview, November 2, 2020)

The focus on personal strengths and cultivating a relationship-driven staff within the organization, in reality, has some real limitations when up against hundreds of years of structural and systemic inequality paired with contemporary policies that push individuals and families further to the margins of society.

Listening to Understand Staff and Community Members' Needs

As part of its structure, the organization uses feedback systems in order to hear from staff and community members and inform decision-making and program development. Servant leadership scholarship discusses the importance of listening, emphasizing that "soliciting ideas and feedback from other individuals, openly sharing information with those around us, and listening proactively are all behaviors that arise from commitment to the growth of people" (Buck, 2019, p. 306), In our first interview, Ellen explained that one of the principles she started with when she co-founded this organization was "not assuming that we knew everything, but assuming that people knew everything about what would be good for them" (interview, September 10, 2020). This principle led to the importance of building trusting relationships and establishing ways to listen across the organization.

In the following section, I'll detail some feedback from staff about their frustrations regarding the flat organizational structure and how listening was a tool to inform the development of a distributed leadership model.

From a Flat Organizational Structure to a "Wider-archy"

During the time period I was observing the global meetings and interviewing between September and December 2020, there was a lot of discussion of the organization being a "flat" organization, indicating the lack of hierarchy. This concept seemed incongruent with the organizational chart (the Venn Diagram in Chapter 1) and terms such as "manager" and

"director" that implied hierarchy.

In an interview Ellen named "flat"ness as core value of the organization saying, "So I can tell you what we ascribe to do, and we ascribe, we ascribe to follow our values. So that is open, being direct, caring, a learning organization, open door, and very flat" (Interview, September 18, 2020). When asked about the definition of a "flat" organization and if that means the absence of hierarchy, she replied,

> I think the current working definition is that everybody's voice matters, and we assure that, and we will have certain ways to measure that. Because we're big on making sure we're measuring and making sure that that's the case. But there is some hierarchy, because everybody deserves to have somebody that's going to work to develop them.
>
> We're very high on development. (Ellen interview, September 10, 2020)

Ellen sees hierarchy not as the enemy of an equitable workplace culture, but a tool for individualized and sustained mentoring relationships that can be tools for development.

In my data collection and analysis, I found that there was a level of skepticism and frustration amongst the staff about the viability of proceeding as a "flat" organization while sustaining such rapid organizational growth. Including everyone's voice slowed down processes and created confusion about whose responsibility a task or decision ultimately was. Zelda said,

> I just think it's sometimes easier when ... sometimes there's just, it's great that everyone's opinion is heard. I love that. I think everyone should have a voice, but sometimes when a decision needs to be made and sometimes, I'm like Ellen just needs to make this decision and we don't need to have 10 people all feel that they need to weigh in on it. (Interview, September 29, 2020)

In her role, Harmony expressed her frustration about the constructivist nature of a flat

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organization saying, "I want to be told what to do. I don't want to create what to do. I want you to lead me and that's not what you get in the flat organization", and again, "that flat organization, it got a little frustrating. When you want results, and you want them now. It's like I don't want to talk to everybody. I just want to go to one person and have one person tell me what to do and how to do it" (May 19, 2021). This frustration around flatness was a theme in Maxine's interview as well, she said,

> One of the things that they always like to talk about is how the organization is flat. I don't agree. I don't see it as flat. If it is flat, I don't see that as anything to brag about. Because it just means that information and decision making, and things can get stacked up. (March 8, 2021)

The notion of flatness became a weakness of the organization and, due to listening to staff feedback, had begun to evolve by May 2021 when I spoke with Ben again. He explained:

> People want structure. People want to know, where am I in the organization, what are the ways that I can grow, who am I accountable to, and who am I able to ask for support from. So that feedback over time, in different ways, it could be in meetings, it could be in one-on-one conversations, it could be through surveys. There have been a whole collection of things that we've done to try to create these conversations. But that's really the piece that needs to be figured out. Because I think an issue with the flat organization is at the end of the day, somebody had to be responsible for the whole. And without any kind of differentiation on responsibility that people are taking, it all became on Ellen's shoulders. And it was, Ellen's responsible for the whole, everybody is responsible for their individual pieces. And that's not sustainable for Ellen, it's not sustainable for our organization. And it's something that could work when there were 12-15 of us. But at 55,

it just doesn't work. (Ben interview, May 13, 2021).

Growth of the organization, in all ways, really: number of hubs, number of staff, number of partners, number of programs, number of volunteers, how much money fundraised, how many grants awarded; all this growth also created expansion from a small, close-knit staff with a very hands-on leader to an organization with democratic aspirations and staff with limited capacity struggling to include everyone in decision-making. Ben explained,

> We're dropping the idea of flat to some degree. A word that came up in the global team meeting from [global team staff] was 'wider-archy', which I truly love it. Because the idea is, instead of a top depth on a hierarchical staffing structure - you really use circles. And the deeper you get into these concentric circles, the more responsibility you take for the whole. So, someone like Ellen is in towards the center. The center is really a mission. But somebody like Ellen is in an inner ring, because she has a view for the whole. Whereas individual contributors in particular departments or teams are more on the outer ring. And they have a particular slice of the pie that they're focused on, not the whole pictures. (Ben interview May 13, 2021)

Because of vocal staff feedback, the organization made changes to their structure that better fits the needs of their larger staff and ultimately supports the mission of kid success. This new configuration will be discussed in depth later in this chapter in the leadership section.

Soliciting Community Feedback

Another way listening is utilized in reference to community members and their experiences with the organization. In the Department Guide for Community Engagement, this artifact (Figure below) demonstrates the systems for information and voices to move from the community to the department.

Figure 6.6

Excerpt from Department Guide for Community Engagement

- How does information flow from our participants to our department?
    - <u>Facebook</u>: Each site has a page for daily posts and communications.
    - <u>Remind</u>: Each site manages their Remind posts and participates' feedback
    - <u>Email</u> (site and personal): Each team member has a personal email.
      Each site has an email address.
    - <u>Nextdoor Digest</u>: Each site subscribes based on their community's location
    - <u>Google voice:</u> Managers & coordinators set this up for professional use for phone calls and text messages.
    - <u>Vonage:</u> Each site has a number for phone calls and text messages.
    - <u>In person</u>: Participants are always welcome to come through our orange doors (during the Pandemic please follow COVID safety regulations)
    - <u>Info Email</u>: Organization's email address & information is cascaded
    - <u>Intakes:</u> One-on-One interaction with participants
    - <u>EZ Text:</u> Mass text messaging tool
    - <u>Wish Upon a Star:</u> Evaluation tool used to track participants' personal and professional goals
    - <u>Site's Newsletter:</u> Each hub sends the community monthly Brilliant Detroit news, programs and activities

Beginning with an invitation to the neighborhood, a series of listening sessions is the beginning of the relationship between the organization and the community. Listening sessions are also scheduled quarterly, I was invited to observe a Covid-19-focused listening session and Octavia shared her notes from her hub's Racial Equity listening session. From there, another important system for incorporating the voice of the community is through neighborhood advisory boards. Octavia explains this system of collecting the voices of community members:

> So, we meet once a month, and the discussion is generally... and these advisory members, they're normally beacons of our community, they're people that the community knows, they're very, very involved. They go to all these community meetings, they're part of the block club. So, they know what is going on in the community, they know what is needed in the community. When we do listening sessions, they're the kind of people that you want to hear from. So those are the kind of people that we have on our team. (Interview,

June 10, 2021).

In illuminating example of incorporating community member voice, Hope, the programming director, described how African American participants at several neighborhood sites (and specifically not the Latinx-serving sites) used their agency to change the curriculum and instructor of a social-emotional learning class,

> …the feedback that we received from participants was that it wasn't culturally relevant. The curriculum wasn't, as well as the facilitator. And so, a lot of the information was not received well. It was... Some of it was culturally insensitive. Some of it was just not resonating… And so, when we received that feedback, we had to go back and tell our grants and our funders, this is the feedback that we're receiving, what are some things that we can do to help to make the program better or for it to be received…We hired more African American facilitators to be able to bring that... or to bridge that cultural barrier. (Hope interview, October 6, 2020)

The program director has an important connector role between global and neighborhoods in which they mediate and supervise the delivery of programs from partner organizations to neighborhood hubs.   Hope, who held the role during data collection in Fall 2020, represents the neighborhood staff and community members in her role as she interacts with partners and funders. She indicated that this can be a tricky situation, particularly when programs come from academia. She explains,

> So, these are people who have expertise in this area, but... So, to come back and say, it doesn't fit, sometimes depending on the partner that you have that can lead to not so very comfortable conversations if the other participant is not open and willing to hear that feedback. So, we were very grateful that these partners were receptive to it. (Hope

interview, October 6, 2020).

Hope's example demonstrated the agency of both the community members and herself as the Program Director. As Lindsay (Senior Operations Manager) described in her definition of kid success, one of the things Neighborhood Strong does is keep "kids and families at the center of decisions", which might make partners and funders uncomfortable, but it's an organizational commitment to shift power and trust into the hands of families, acknowledging that only they know what is best for themselves. The families using their agency to disengage from the culturally insensitive program and give critical feedback to the program director created a more just and culturally relevant program in the future. Global team members, though once removed from the community members and neighborhood hubs, keep the focus on the mission as a way to invoke "kids and families" into their daily tasks.

Another example, which brings some nuance into the conversation about community agency and voice in programs came from an interview I had with Melody. She is a young Black woman who had been the Coordinator with Octavia at Dexter-Linwood and had moved into the position of Community Engagement Manager at a hub that was undergoing renovations. I spoke to Melody about her role facilitating a literacy program I had observed which had been serving several neighborhoods virtually. She had ended up in this position when a global team coworker was over capacity in her own role. Ellen asked Melody to host the Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program which included supporting local university undergraduate students as they worked in small groups or one-on-one with students.

The RIF program featured a collection of new books that the organization supplied the families and they read from a different one each week. Because she had taken over the role from a colleague, she hadn't looked at all of the books. She described a situation that arose during one

of those weeks about a book called "Julian is a Mermaid" by Jessica Love.

The cover of the book shows a barefoot young boy with cinnamon-toned skin, standing in a triumphant pose in front of a brick wall, with a tablecloth wrapped around his waist, and cascading to the sidewalk below. He wears a crown made of fronds of a plant and his face is adorned with red lipstick. The story is about an Afro-Latino boy in New York named Julian who is leaving the pool with his grandmother when they see three people dressed up as mermaids on the city bus. The book starts, "This is a boy named Julian. And this is his abuela. And those are some mermaids. Julian LOVES mermaids" (Love, 2018). After they arrive back home, the pictures show Julian using different items from around the house to dress himself up as a mermaid. His abuela finds him, dressed up and wearing make-up, and she offers him a necklace. She takes him out to meet up with the other mermaids attending a parade. Most of the story is told through the paintings. Melody reflected on the situation,

> Actually, had I known, I didn't have time to go through any of the books at all, but had I known that it was like that, I definitely would've taken that one out because I know like, 'Oh, they're not going to like this.' But to combat that, once one of the moms had told me, she was like, 'Hey, this book, I was looking through the books and I saw this *Julian is a Mermaid*. He will not be participating in this one.'...It was specifically, he was wearing a dress. Like, oh no. Actually, I don't know all of the feedback, but [Community Engagement Manager] said that a lot of her families were like, 'no'.
> A lot of people were ready to get off [of the Zoom call], but they were committed to being a part of it. So that was some outside feedback that she gave me that the families didn't tell me. But what I did was we didn't have the discussion for that book. So, we didn't have the discussion after. We just sort of ended it with a song and then okay.

Which I really was indecisive about because it's like, you discuss it to say, okay,

whatever, the book is just the book or whatever…engage that discussion or do we not

discuss it? And then you leave those kids wondering like, okay, am I supposed to wear a

dress? So, it's like this whole little debate got us in our head. I'm like, okay. So, the next

session, we just shut that down and chose a different book for the other session.

(Interview, April 26, 2021).

In our interview, I commented on how that demonstrates how the organization is able to hear

community feedback and make decisions based on family feedback. And how the book, even

though it has won awards and accolades, may not be a good fit for all communities. Melody

agreed, saying "for this type of community, that's a no, no". When I asked her to clarify what

community she means, she responded,

Because it seems like the book was geared towards more families that are open-minded

with having those conversations, about gender neutral type things. But the black, urban

community, it's like, that's a no. We don't talk about that type of community. (Interview,

April 26, 2021).

In an interview with Olivia, the White woman staff member who had handed off the project to

Melody, she reflected on the incident,

Yeah, I felt bad because I wasn't overseeing that program when that happened. I kind of

just set up the program for one of my colleagues to oversee… I was made aware that

some of the families were uncomfortable. There was an email that was sent out to a few

of the folks. My colleague, me, our programming director, our program staff, things like

that and just kind of like there were some families that were uncomfortable with this,

because we have multiple sites that we're using the same reading list, so do we need to

pull it from the book list from the other sites to make sure that we're not making people

uncomfortable? Things like that. (Olivia interview, May 5, 2021)

Olivia indicated that she was aware of the stigma based on nonconforming gender and sexuality

in the Black and religious communities, so she wasn't necessarily surprised by the community

reaction to the book, but she was surprised by the organization's response.

In our interview, Olivia worked through some of the larger nuances and tensions that

arise in a diverse community spaces. The example stemming from the *Julian is a Mermaid* book

illuminates these tensions that occur within and outside of the organization,

> … I was kind of surprised that we would just go straight to pulling the book instead of
>
> maybe trying to understand more like, okay, who is uncomfortable with it and why? And
>
> maybe, we need to do something where that is a subject that we explore and unpack a
>
> little bit more because if there's those kinds of viewpoints, then it's possible that we have
>
> families and participants that are gender non-conforming, or they fall somewhere on the
>
> spectrum of homosexuality, or their gay or queer identities, and they are being judged and
>
> made to feel uncomfortable by some of our other families. So, in my mind that's
>
> something that we should deal with, it's something that it's not to just be like, okay, let's
>
> just knee jerk reaction pull this, something to have a bigger discussion around it? I think
>
> if we want to think of our sites as, like, a safe space, then they should be a safe space for
>
> everybody...It's just like a very gray area because, yeah, we don't want to make our
>
> neighbors, our families, feel alienated but we don't want anyone to feel alienated. We
>
> don't want to make anyone feel unsafe, that they can't come or participate or be a
>
> Neighborhood Strong participant, but we also don't want to make our families feel
>
> uncomfortable for viewpoints that they've had, because they were raised that way and

taught to believe these things. (Interview, May 20, 2021)

In her processing, Olivia covers many of the unnamed challenges and contradictions that arise when bringing different stakeholders, with varying viewpoints, into partnership and relationship. Melody was closest to the families in that she was running the program and her role allows her to have a sustained relationship with the community. Olivia, in her role is once removed from the community space, and she is also a young White woman who lives in Detroit but is not from Detroit, nor is she from the Black or religious community that was pushing back against the subject matter of the book.

Maybe because of the distance, Olivia was able to trouble the notion of the community as a monolith, questioning the utility of responding to the community's pushback with a complete retraction of the book and future lessons. She surfaces a tension of a community responsive space that could reproduce discriminatory or exclusionary attitudes and therefore preclude the possibility of inclusion and belonging from the wide range of community members who may want to participate. Another factor in this, was the role of the university partner who gave Neighborhood Strong the book list that named *Julian is a Mermaid* as a possible selection. Olivia mentioned this in her recollection of the events, saying, "So, it came to me from the professor, and I was like, well, you know better than I do, probably" (Olivia interview, May 20, 2021).

Thinking across both Hope's example of the community's feedback around the cultural insensitivity of the socioemotional learning program and the *Julian* scenario described by Melody and Olivia, it seems there were some missed opportunities to engage in listening to the community before a program was being delivered.

Melody may ask how could the organization have been more proactive and engaged in listening and tuning in to the community *before* bringing misaligned elements of programs to the

families? While Olivia is asking, how can we make all of our neighbors feel safe and included while also being aware of attitudes and beliefs of the participating families? Olivia's reliance on the professor for the recommendations of the book aligns with the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 that the literacy programs and materials are not culturally responsive or designed with any specific community in mind.

Unrestricted Funding Supports the Ability to Listen

As Melody and Olivia's experiences reflect, sharing trust and power across staff and community members is an important goal of Neighborhood Strong. As a growing nonprofit, the search for funding is an ongoing process that is critical to creating a responsive environment for staff and community members. Neighborhood Strong relies on grants—often from foundation funding—as well as private fundraising. In a global meeting, I was able to see the specific breakdown of their finances. They noted in the meeting that they always strive to have 55% unrestricted funding in the annual budget, meaning funds that are not tied up in a particular grant or project but can be used for any need. When I asked Ellen about this she explained in detail,

> So, we decided that at the forefront. And so, we do have ... like, Bruce, our board chair is a very good fundraiser. And we did have to think strategically at the beginning of the year, when we were getting so many grants, because it has to be balanced. I promise community that they have a voice. They don't have a voice if all of our funding is from foundations. And that's probably one of the most important questions or one of the most frequent questions I get when I'm in community. And so, I want to make sure that-I always want to make sure that I'm true to what we say. So, it's really how we do our strategy and you know what? It's why we didn't have to lay anybody off during the pandemic. It's all of those things. We had a $2 million sub fund. So how we've set

ourselves up has been good. I don't want to say it was by accident, because it wasn't. It was all conscious decisions, but I don't think we realized how important, how good that would be for us.

Because of the commitment to community voice and community trust, the organization focuses on raising more than half of their annual budget from donors. This allows for creativity and flexibility in spending throughout the year, which Ellen named as key reason they did not have to lay anyone off during the pandemic. Zelda's primary workload involves handling donor relationships and soliciting donations in a variety of ways. Like Ellen, she points to the co-founder, Bruce, and calls him the "the ultimate fundraiser". In her role, she admits, she almost never works with the community members or the community engagement managers. It was almost shocking to hear her talk about relationships with donors in a proprietary way. Note the way she's using the term "own" in the following excerpt from her interview,

> This was really Bruce's thing, and he has through his business, through his community involvement, he has an abundance of very, kind of, more wealthy friends and business associates. So that is a big pipeline to our fundraising and why it's been so successful. My role is a little different in the sense that some of those relationships, or really many of them, are owned by Bruce and I believe... It's not like I don't want to force myself into what is already a super successful relationship, him with his friend, him with his business counterpart. They love Neighborhood Strong, and they donate significant dollars to Neighborhood Strong. Then some of those relationships, I own many of them. Ellen owns from her background coming from [previous nonprofit role], or from her years of consulting. She knows a ton of people as well, many on the grant side of things. It's really kind of a combination. (Interview, September 9, 2020).

The notion of ownership in the context of relationships struck me as inconsistent with the other things I had heard. Hearing Zelda talk that day reminded me that this organization, though committed to community-focused transformational relationships, was ultimately and inescapably embedded in our capitalist society. There was no escaping the need for "wealthy" donors and all that might mean in the world of philanthropy. While there are many… And also-

Even as the fundraising model echoes the capitalistic and market-driven language of society, it is not considered business-as-usual. Zelda noted that the amount of funding would not make a difference without Ellen's style of leadership, saying, "No matter how much money you put in, this would not be successful without the legitimacy and the experience, and the relationships that Ellen brings. It's a critical partnership" (Interview September 22, 2020).

Unrestricted funding in conjunction with the values, mission, and relationships allow for the organization to commit to a flexibility that is uncommon in institutions, including other nonprofits and schools. Lindsay reflected on her own previous experiences and how she views the role of unrestricted funding in meeting community needs,

> In my experience, coming from working from a hospital, working from a school, even other nonprofits, no one is able to shift to the needs of the community, in my experience: Neighborhood Strong is. That's both from our talent, of having really committed, passionate employees. But it's also because we have unrestricted funding. It's not like a school doesn't know what kids need. You would know that better than me. It's just like, 'You just can't do it,' sometimes, because of the red tape. (Interview September 11, 2020)

The ratio of unrestricted funding allows the organization to operate from more of a flexible position, something that is more common in entrepreneurial or start-up culture than in nonprofits. In fact, Ellen willingly takes on the identity of an entrepreneur and identifying key features of the

organizational culture that fit that model,

> First off, we are clearly social entrepreneurs. We behave that way, and that means, there's a sense of urgency, there's a sense of, let's get this done. We are also now serving 7,000 people in eight neighborhoods that are launched, and eleven [neighborhoods] that we service with the houses being renovated as we speak. And so with startup entrepreneurship, you will see that you reach a point where you have to be more, I don't want to say institutional, but your systems have to be different. You're leading by muscle, not by bone structure, and we need to lead more with the bone structure and the muscle. And we also have to be careful, at this point, not to lose being entrepreneurial. (Interview, September 10, 2020)

Ellen named the urgency and speed that is required of the organization to adapt and grow as much as it has. Across multiple staff members, I heard a weariness about the pace of the work. Olivia said,

> I would also say that there's definitely kind of like a grind culture meaning there's always something…It's a really fast-paced workplace. And yeah, I think that it can lead to some burnout. It does lead to some burnout. Yeah, you were…you feel very cared for, in the sense that you're valued that you are like a part of the work that other people appreciate and value you, but I think the other side is that, yeah, there's this constant grind, grind, grind kind of culture that can be really tiring. (Interview May 5, 2021)

As I will discuss in a later section, there are different types of work happening across the organization. The entrepreneurial, fast-paced grind of a social enterprise (Kikul & Lyons, 2016) looks very different and requires varying degrees of self-sacrifice for someone arranging contractors for home repair than it does for someone who is walking side-by-side with

community members through an ongoing pandemic and focusing their needs (Eva et al., 2019).

Leading with a Servant Role

From the beginning of my data collection to the end of my data collection, the organization had reorganized itself from a flat organizational structure to a distributed leadership model which included well defined departments and roles. Not only was this structure responsive to the existing staff, but it was an effort to create a structure that would withstand the rapid growth related to the organizational goal of opening 24 hubs by 2024.

The reorganized model included the creation of distinct departments and roles (encoded in department guides) and a distributed leadership model which included the Enterprise team and the Neighborhood Leadership Team (NLT). Ben explained that the Enterprise team was made up of, "key members who are across the organization who have a sense for what's the long-term work that we need to do" and the NLT described here,

> The NLT is really the influencer. It's the team that draws from each department to make sure that all of the departments are working in a coordinated way to advance kids' success. And the way it's structured is that it pulls proportionally from different departments. So, a department like community engagement, which has the most staff, has the most representation on the NLT. And a department like admin, which has only three or four staff members and mostly consultants in addition to them has much fewer representatives. And there's also rotating membership on the NLT. So, every six months, some of the members will rotate. Which allows different staff members to have that opportunity to exercise that leadership also. So that's where we've been in a lot of ways, is getting all of these pieces of our structure solidified so that we can really scale and function well on that scale. (Ben interview, May 13, 2021)

Feedback from the team, coupled with unprecedented growth of the organization paved the way for a new structure to emerge.

Servant leaders

Based on the description of service leadership in Chapter 2, there is a clear alignment with Ellen's leadership style.

Other leaders in the space, including Maxine and Olivia, share their leadership as expressed through their Christian identities. Maxine described how religion influenced her leadership role as community engagement manager,

> That is very much so the reason why I'm here. There is a group of us [Neighborhood Strong staff] that meet daily at 6:30am, and before school started back for my kids, we would meet daily Monday through Friday as 7:30am, and we would pray for our team, our Neighborhood Strong team, pray for our families, pray for those who were suffering from COVID, and whatever other idea people could bring or prayer requests people could bring alignment of resources, 'This morning we pray for our incarcerated Black men,' all types of stuff. To me, being able to do that with my coworkers is amazing and foundational. A lot of times I say that we are acting as God's hands, His feet, and His voice. And it's an honor to be able to do that. It's an honor to be able to do that. It's a privilege to be able to voice the parts of myself that are foundational in this setting…There's many times when you can pull up on distribution and you may see me kneeling by a car holding hands with somebody praying because they need it or because they share something with me and I'm like, "Oh my God, we need to pray right now." So, it's an honor and a privilege to be able to express that side of me that is very essential because it's what fuels me. It's what makes up for the gap. The staff there is this greater purpose that's being fulfilled. (Maxine interview, November 2, 2020)

Octavia described her role as the manager as part of describing how religion influences how she does her work:

> I told you my background is in ministry. My husband is a pastor, and I am a pastor too. I'm an ordained pastor and I like to call myself a Matthew 25 Christian. I don't know your background, but Matthew 25 is basically Jesus saying when I was hungry, you fed me, when I was homeless, you took me in, when I needed clothes you clothed me, when I was in prison you came to visit me, when I was sick you.... that's my own personal motto for living, for my existence. I'm a servant leader. I see myself as a servant to the Dexter-Linwood community. It's how my faith has impacted me to serve. (Octavia, April 29, 2021)

In the community-facing roles, like those of the community engagement managers, these women describe how their faith drives and supports them and is something they can share with the community.

Managers as Leaders: Carrying the Weight of Cultural and Linguistic Brokering Across the Organization

Neighborhood Strong's rapid growth across the city wasn't slowed even slowed by a global pandemic, in fact, they grew. Most of this growth happened in the Community Engagement Department as new neighborhood hubs opened. Each hub typically consists of one manager and one coordinator, these roles are expected to reflect the demographics of the community, and ideally the staff will even come from that neighborhood. As the number of community engagement managers grew, so too did the number of Black women on staff. My findings indicate that hub managers have an important role of cultural brokering, acting as a

liaison between the community and the organization. These roles in the organization require particular skills in "translation".

Cultural and linguistic brokering

Harmony explains, "I'm translating what's going on from top to bottom and bottom to top. Yeah, some things I have to translate. I mean, it's told to me one way, I'm like, I can't tell it to them that way" (Interview, September 22, 2020).

As for Teodora, she has the added responsibility of being a cultural and linguistic broker for her Southwest neighborhood team consisting of three women who act as the coordinating, evaluation, and childcare team for the hub. I inquired about if and how the organization supports the linguistic diversity of her staff. In staff meetings, Teodora takes on the labor of translation. She explains,

> That's what I'm doing here, but it's hard to translate just for three people, and you can't translate everything. But we also have a kind of debriefing between us, we always go over what they understood, did they have questions. I always, with my team, I want to make sure they're getting everything they can get from whatever those things are. Sometimes you really don't need to get anything from them, but when there is, I always try to do a meeting, "What did you think of the meeting? Do you have questions? Do you understand what was going on in there?" And then even in person, there was us together, we think it's mainly because they support each other that way.

This creates a disconnect between the staff at Southwest and the rest of the staff. This includes across the neighborhood teams and definitely across the larger organizational team. Teodora said,

That sometimes they're saying, 'I don't know why you need to connect them.' They don't feel like they have anything to say, or it doesn't have anything to do with them. Or there's times where, 'I get nervous talking to that many people.' So, they're used to an intimate one-on-one, it's just four of us connecting together. (Interview, June 9, 2021)

These Spanish-language dominant colleagues will text message Teodora during meetings to represent them if they want to bring up an issue or have a question they would like answered. It surprised me that a team that supports nearly half of the participating families across the organization could themselves be so inward-facing and seemingly isolated. Because Dexter-Linwood did not have a community engagement coordinator and Southwest had a staff of three, I did not pursue interviews with these staff members, leaving some lingering questions about this example of the extra labor of cultural and linguistic brokering that Teodora carries in her role as well as the quality of accessibility and participation by staff members in the linguistic minority.

Differing realities

There's a levity that is associated with many of the global roles; a focus on stewardship and programming and spreading the message of the mission with beautiful social media posts and fundraising drives. There are exceptions to this, for instance Ellen, Lindsay, Abril, whose roles or preferences ensure they maintain contact with community members. But there's a distance, and therefore, a natural disconnect between what is happening on the ground in neighborhoods and what is happening in the global space of the organization. What I found across my data collection, is that community-facing roles that require proximity to the neighborhood also require the work and emotional experiences of relationship-building than the others. Additionally, proximity to the community members means proximity to the societal ills that as a country we have deemed permissible: poverty, hunger, blight, joblessness, the effects of

mass incarceration, drug addiction, mental illness, and the hopelessness and despair that accompany those realities.

"It's because somebody comes to us with a need"

Maxine, who had already left the position when we spoke the second time explained the challenge of being seen as a resource where there is so much need, including the consistent problem of "mission creep" where the organization, staff, or community members are reaching outside of the predetermined bounds of the mission,

> You have to reign yourself in. You have to check yourself and not make the job hard. Sometimes those realizations… they don't come until you've already made it harder. You've already exhausted yourself. It all comes from trying to help somebody. You know what I'm saying? It's not just us trying to make our job hard and trying to experience creep scope just because we want to create something. No. It's because somebody comes to us with a need. There's a need that we see or that we hear of and we want to address it because look at all these tools we got. Why can't we use these tools to address this?
>
> (Maxine interview, March 8, 2021)

In her reflection here, Maxine highlights the personal connection that makes the work of the community engagement staff so heavy: there is so much need in the community. This feeling of responsibility for attending to the needs of families is visceral for these staff members and distal for many others. In her words, she describes the multiplicity of trauma that community engagement managers are engaging with,

> People are traumatized because of loss and violence and because of blight and because of declining property values and then over in this area property values are inclining in such a way that, you know, gentrification is happening. All that is traumatic. So, recognizing

that people are traumatized, and we need to offer services that address those things too. I

feel like that's happening. (Maxine interview, November 2, 2020)

The challenges Maxine describes are all ongoing and consistent issues for Detroiters. When

Covid-19 arrived in the city in March 2020, the Community Engagement Managers realized they

were essential workers for their communities. Maxine describes the shift for the families and for

her team,

Those [families] that were participating in the mission, COVID disrupted all of that, and

although we knew what was coming, our team, we had a meeting right before the

shutdown happened. We knew what was coming. We knew what we wanted to focus on

during COVID in the beginning of the pandemic. We knew that we wanted to be here for

our families, and we shifted from being this space that provided programming and was a

safer space for families, to being this distribution center. We distributed food, supplies,

hope, prayer, and eventually more programs but virtually. (Maxine interview, November

2, 2020)

They distributed "hope". They distributed "prayer". Within the organization, the responsibility of

this emotionally laden labor falls on the mostly female African American and Latinx staff. Their

role is such that they are emotionally available and a support to their community at all times

while global staff can have feedback sessions where they discuss if a program, partner, or grant

aligns with the mission, the role of the community engagement staff doesn't allow for the same

emotional distance from the work.

Managers as first responders

In the coming paragraphs I will allow the managers to describe some of the ways they carry the weight of community work. *(Trigger warning: Included in Olivia's quotes is a depiction of suicide).*

When I asked Teodora about how her identity influences her role, she talked about the realities of being a Detroiter and how that allows her to connect with the families at the hub,

> I think I have a first hands-on experience of what it does feel like to live here, and kind of the barriers and challenges that we face as Detroiters, and the school system and everything, and all that aspect. On top of that I'm a minority. I feel like that plays a big role in how I see things, and how I'm able to help the community. It kind of is nice that I reflect the community, so it's kind of like I can totally understand what they're coming from, what they're going through, and what their needs are, so that really makes the biggest difference. I think it's great that we were able to connect and that I do have a little higher education, because at that same aspect I'm able to help families grow and learn more and teach, at a certain level.

As I continued to interview Teodora, I asked about how immigration plays a role at the Southwest hub. She described her personal and professional experiences with the immigration system,

> It is definitely heartbreaking when families come to me and tell me their husband was deported, and could they have a letter [an immigration reference letter of support]. Coming from experience, my husband, when I married him, he was non-documented, and there was a point where he was going to be deported because we hadn't moved on it. We'd been married for so long, for a good three years, but we never moved on anything to get that started. Getting that call in the middle of the night saying, 'Hey I'm in

immigration, I'm held for... Don't sign anything.' It's great to have been in the community because you know what to do in those circumstances. I think if I wouldn't have been that involved, Southwest Solutions [a regional partner] had people come and do workshops and all kinds of involvement. We are very fortunate to have a lot of people connecting and, kind of, fighting for our community if they were to ever fall into those circumstances. Everything went well and now my husband has been, I want to say for a good four years, and he's legal and everything is in order thank God, and I don't have to worry about whether he comes home or not. So, I can totally see how difficult it is, especially, I want to say after, no since Obama. Obama was supposedly helping a lot of immigration, but I think he had more deportations than Trump. Then like I can remember when Trump was elected, our families coming with the longest face and saying how they were afraid for their lives, you know? Well, everything that's happened is horrible, so that really affects our mental health, our communities' mental health to see those things happening. (Teodora interview, November 13, 2020)

Teodora shared in the horror of many of the families that participated at the Southwest hub when her husband was arrested by immigration authorities, and she also is a point of contact for them when their family member or spouse is taken into custody. They reach out to her for a "letter", this refers to a letter of reference for immigration bond release. Teodora references the Obama and Trump administration for failure to protect or create a path to legalization for immigrants. Adding her analysis of the situation she says,

It's convenient for the United States to have immigrants, especially illegal immigrants. Illegal immigrants, because all those illegal immigrants are paying taxes and they're not getting any of their money back. All that is being pocketed by the government. It's

convenient for them to do this...I feel like families have been here for decades who have

not been legal and there hasn't been any opportunity or chance for them to legalize. I

don't know if it's happening with COVID. I feel like they're behind now more than ever.

(Teodora interview, November 13, 2020)

Teodora and her staff stand with families in the struggle, increasingly without the resources to

combat the wanton immigration enforcement of the political moment. It's difficult to promote

kid success families when there is the constant threat of deportation and the rapidly changing

rules of U.S. immigration.

As discussed in the Dexter-Linwood chapter, Octavia had first-hand experience of being

a parent of small children in the city and encountering apathy from the school system. This

experience drove her family out of the city in search of other educational opportunities, but it

also gave her a personal connection to the families that are still there.

[Trigger warning until the next section: Included in Olivia's quotes is a depiction of

suicide] Octavia, as with many others who are the faces of the organization (on the ground and in

communities) are familiar with persistent challenges. She described hearing from community

members who described mental health support as a critical need during the pandemic. In one of

our interviews, she recounted being at the neighborhood hub and hearing a hysterical community

member participant, who lived on the street, knocking on the door and yelling for Octavia to call

9-1-1. Octavia was choked up as she described to me the event that had happened just the day

before our interview. She answered the door for the distressed woman who explained that her

partner had hung himself. When she spoke to me about it, she explained,

So, this is a side of community engagement that we don't hear. When I talk about mental

health, and the toll it had on the community. You can't prepare yourself; you can't prepare

yourself for that. And when I say our culture is love, even after he was declared dead, I

had to stay there with her because homicide still had to come and do their own

thing…remained there for another three hours. So, there's a side of community

engagement that you really have to have the heart for it. You really have to have the heart

for it. And you really have to be their voice. Because literally you can be the only person

that they have. I mean, she could have gone anywhere but she came to the site. She could

have gone anywhere. But she came to the site. She came, she was knocking, "Please dial

911." And I ended up being there with her, staying with her through the whole process.

(Interview, June 10, 2021)

After sharing her experience with me in our virtual interview, I asked Octavia if she had support

from the organization. Octavia said she had just gotten off a call with her Senior Community

Engagement Manager who asked her the same. She said her community needed her right now,

"I've just been going non-stop since then, because they literally need me. I can't cut it off right

now. I'm on autopilot right now". I expressed my condolences and my hope that she would find

time and community to process this event with. She thanked me and added, "I thought it was

important to be authentic here".

The authentic experiences of the Community Engagement Managers, Teodora, Maxine,

and Olivia, brought into focus how much of the organization they carry in their role. Ellen says,

"everybody is a leader in the organization"; but not everyone can do what these women do. The

organizational culture of love, learning and leadership is supported in the literature on servant

leadership, Buck (2019) says, "because of their focus on followers, those who lead through love

express themselves through listening and awareness which leads to empathy" (p.308).

Part III: Collective Hope for the Future

Find the wounded places in your community, where thinking and action are stagnant—bring the medicine of imagination. -adrianne maree brown, "Dream Beyond the Wounds"

In this final section of the findings on the organization, I overview the theme of "hope" that appeared across many interviews. As evidenced in this chapter, there are ways that the organization creates spaces full of love, listening, learning, and leadership; the model of the organization is such that so many of the painful and difficult-to-navigate realities of the lives of community members are navigated by women of color in the community engagement roles. As Harmony said, the organization isn't perfect. In many ways, though, data suggest that the characteristics of servant leadership, including altruistic calling, create an environment where hope for the future is the norm. Searle and Barbuto (2011) say, "hope can be developed by facilitating a supportive, caring, listening, and challenging environment (Snyder, 1994). Therefore, altruistic calling [of a servant leader] can foster the trust and safety necessary to facilitate the development of hope" (p.112).

The notion of kid success families and neighborhoods seems to position people to imagine possibilities of the future. One of the ways the organization does this is through the evaluation intake known as "Wish Upon a Star" where the community engagement team member at the hub has a goal-setting conversation with the new family. Ben described how this goal setting has spread across the organization,

> So, an example being, when we work with our participants, the idea is if you wish upon a star, what do you want for your kids and family? Then applying those goals and then supporting those paths through opportunities to achieve those goals. We're now doing some of our work with our staff, through something called Strong U, which is really what

are your personal goals, how do you want to grow into your role? And how do you want

your role to grow? (Ben interview, May 13, 2021)

As the organization continues to develop and evolve, the mission remains squarely on the kids

and kids are the future of our families and neighborhoods. Maxine asked, "How is this going to

prepare my kid and the next generation of kids for life?" (November 2, 2020).

Lindsay also emphasized the future, saying, "I feel that, by putting an emphasis on kids

and kids' success, even more so than saying family success. I feel like putting the emphasis on

kids really brings in this idea of the future of the neighborhood, and the future of, who's going to

own our city?"

Ellen, with her decades of experience, and steadfast commitment to people, not

institutions, said,

And this path, for me, I tell everyone, "I'm old and I live a fairytale." I have never seen

anything move like this. And I'm just so blessed to be part of it. But at the center of

everything are the people that we serve, or as I would say, that we walk alongside, and

that really our North Star is clearer and clearer, we call it Kid Success Neighborhoods.

But our North Star is that zip codes do not predict a child's success. And I aim to see that

happen. (Ellen interview, September 10, 2020).

It could be said that this is an outrageous goal to speak aloud. Since the first Detroit zip codes

rolled out in 1963, they represented the community contained and sometimes constrained within

them. An EdBuild report entitled *Faultlines: America's Most Segregating School District

Borders* (2020) named the Detroit Public School Community District and the nearby Grosse

Pointe Public Schools District border as one of the most segregated by race and income level in

the entire country. The history and legacy of disinvestment across neighborhoods in the majority

Black city will not be easily forgotten or remedied.

As mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, and as noted below in Figure 6.7 from Neighborhood

Strong, the combination of population loss, job loss, civic and fiscal disinvestment, and public-

school closures have all affected the educational trajectory of children who live in Detroit's

neighborhoods, and this is directly related to zip codes and the harmful and reverberating race-

based housing policies that shaped the city. In an April 2020 document, the organization named

some of the ways Detroit communities have been affected by racialized policies and systems. In

the document they name historical redlining, the 2008 housing crisis that disproportionately

harmed the cities low-income families of color, and they point to the lack of early access to early

childhood spaces in the city.

Figure 6.7

Except from the Neighborhood Strong document entitled April 2020: A Perspective

The Challenge

There are 55,000 children under the age of five in Detroit. 59% of these children live at or below the Federal Poverty Line. There is an estimated service gap of 30,000 early childhood opportunities for our youngest children and most of this shortage is in our most vulnerable neighborhoods. By five years old, our children who are not being served can be up to two years behind in development.

Only 23% of Detroit's children are ready for kindergarten. Only 15.1% of Detroit students read at grade level by third grade. These are two of the biggest predictors of success later in life.

There are many causes of poverty in Detroit communities, particularly communities of color. These include historic racial segregation through "redlining," the loss of resources through "White flight," and the systemic defunding of public education and resources. The housing foreclosure crisis in Detroit a decade ago exacerbated these issues, creating more turnover and straining community relationships in neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the history of Detroit is one of resilience and persistence. Communities are still full of families that want what is best for their children and work together to raise the next generation.

In the next and final chapter, I will return to my research questions and analyze my findings through the multilevel sociocultural framework discussed in Chapter 2, paying attention to notions of power, resistance, and other key concepts supported by my critical sociocultural lens. In this way, I will discuss how the organization is situated within our society, emphasizing how the mission of kid success and the offerings of literacy programs are operationalized within the context of the neighborhoods.

Chapter 7: Analysis and Conclusion

In order to explore the literacy programs and family engagement within the neighborhood community spaces of Neighborhood Strong, I wanted to view the organization within the context of Detroit. I employed an ecological model that allowed me to view the layered levels of influence that ultimately affect family engagement and literacy programs. Importantly, I brought a critical sociocultural approach that allowed me to view relationships, programs, and activities through the lenses of identity, power, and agency that exist within learning spaces. In Detroit, and at Neighborhood Strong specifically, identity, power, and agency are most often connected to race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, immigration status, and religion. Because traditional ecological models (i.e., Bronfenbrenner) do not account for power and agency, I drew upon on the work of McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) and the Multilevel Sociopolitical Framework (MSF) which reviews the social, institutional, cultural, and individual levels that affect learning while also incorporating a two-way notion of the relationships that include the ever-present forces of power and agency.

In this final chapter, I will review the multilevel sociopolitical framework in regard to the Detroit context, summarize the findings from Chapters 4-6, discuss my key analytical takeaways regarding the research questions, recommend next steps for Neighborhood Strong and the fields of family literacy and engagement, and share my concluding thoughts from the study.

Summary of findings

This case study explored literacy programs in community-based educational spaces serving African American and Latinx youth and families. By focusing the case study on a

nonprofit organization in Detroit, I was able to explore how family engagement, family literacy, and organizational culture were enacted in two neighborhoods supported by the umbrella organization. In reviewing the literature of the educational landscape in Detroit, I was able to point to the ways that the network of neighborhood public education has been affected by a racialized legacy of systemic housing discrimination, disinvestment, and mortgage crises, changing the educational resources in neighborhoods. Additionally, neoliberal policies which include test-based accountability and mechanisms for school closure have further destabilized educational resources in neighborhoods; recent investment across the city is unequally distributed and concentrated in the Downtown area. Despite the powerful forces of oppression, communities in Detroit have always engaged in resistance in many forms. In the following figure, I note some examples of power and resistance that were discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. The oppressive forces are in the orange color and resistant forces are in green. These forces move across the levels in the framework based on the work of McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017).

Figure 7.1

Examples of power and resistance in Detroit across the multilevel sociopolitical framework

Systemic housing discrimination based on race and religion

De-industrialization and disinvestment following globalization of industry

Power and resistance in Detroit

Market-based school policies and state takeover of local school board

Predatory lending, housing market bubble, and the Great Recession

SOCIAL

Loss of school funding building disrepair & school closure

Community-based organizations collaborating to fight school closure and build political power

City of Detroit Bankruptcy

INSTITUTIONAL

Over-taxation of homeowners

CULTURAL

High stakes literacy assessments related to school closure and individual retention

School leaders' resistance to using the retention law & focus on literacy supports

Development of community-centric, culturally-responsive schools and educational spaces

INDIVIDUAL

Across this data, themes emerged related to the holistic vision of kid success and literacy, family engagement and an organizational culture built on caring environments for community members and staff, the flow of power and agency within the organization which are mediated in part through structures of listening and bidirectional learning but also through societal scripts, and the tensions related to community-focused values operating within an organization that uses many of the same market-based philosophies that have harmed the community.

The following findings related to research question 1 about kid success and literacy: 1) community members and staff describe kid success from a holistic, community-focused perspective, 2) across all categories of stakeholders, participants identified the importance of resources, such as basic needs, childcare, and family support to the success of kids, families, and neighborhoods, 3) leaders were more likely than other stakeholders to use dominant storylines

and deficit narratives in how they described success and literacy, and 4) school-based literacy-as-success was invoked more often by leaders while community members and staff more often described a holistic and future-oriented understanding of literacy as a tool for development and self-determination, which includes culturally-significant knowledge, identity, and skills reflective of the ideological model of literacy (Street, 1995).

The following findings relate to the first part of research question 2 that asked: How does each neighborhood hub enact the mission of kid success? Data show: 1) neighborhood staff engaged with families by developing caring relationships and engaging with the needs of the community, including being present and addressing basic needs through distribution, 2) neighborhood staff recognized, elicited, and engaged with family knowledge, and 3) neighborhood staff acted like connectors: connecting families to each other and connecting families to internal and external resources.

Additional findings relate to the second part of research question 2 that asked: How do literacy practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood? Data show: 1) unlike in other ways that the organization was community-responsive, literacy programs were not designed for the community in most cases, 2) despite being power-laden, literacy programs were viewed as neutral, and 3) the literacy programs that were more culturally and linguistically responsive were those designed by or facilitated by the neighborhood staff. Most staff, however, did not yet have the skills to facilitate virtual literacy programs, which would have been especially useful during the pandemic.

Research question 3 asked what organizational culture and structures support or limit the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of "kid success" and literacy. The findings from this section included the themes of 1) staff members loving in the form of enacting caring relationships with

community members and a warm and family-like work culture, 2) leadership and staff leading with a focus on the needs of community members, and 3) leadership learning from community members and staff about what they need through organizational systems that enable listening in various forms.

In the following section I engage in analysis of the findings in relation to the literature and conceptual framework from Chapter 2.

Analysis

The following sections of analysis are divided by the research questions that guided my study and generated a variety of findings related to Neighborhood Strong.

Both organizational resistance to and reproduction of dominant "success" narratives

The findings related to my first question that asked, "What is kid success?" mostly demonstrated a culture of resistance to individualism and the narrowly defined ideas of school-focused success present in dominant societal narratives. Additionally, most of the study participants described success and literacy as dependent on access to resources including basic needs, family support, and materials such as books. The concept of success was interrelated to the success of families and the larger community. In this way, most stakeholders appeared to recognize and name how literacy cannot simply "lift those who learn it out of their socially embedded context" (Street, 1995, p. 79), relating success to the educational and sociopolitical realities of families in Detroit.

In the study, it became clear that individual staff and leaders bring their various understandings of the world into their roles at the organization, something that is expected from a critical sociocultural standpoint. At Neighborhood Strong, it seemed that the distance from or proximity to the community, the mission, or both the community and the mission created different levels of either reproduction of, or resistance to, dominant deficit narratives of families

and kids' success. For instance, in Chapter 6, Bruce talked about the need for preparing Detroit parents to "become much better consumers of education…more like the parents [who] are complaining the suburbs". This implies the issues with education in the city are related to some lack of skills within the families and not the system. This statement also makes invisible the education organizing that has been happening across the city. Whereas, Harmony, who was a Community Engagement Manager resists that individualized narrative and viewed success as being related to their environment. She said success was determined by the availability of "the tools, the people, the resources, everything they [kids] need to thrive". Thus, individuals have varying levels of critical consciousness about the inequitable systems at play and therefore some stakeholders are likely to reproduce the dominant deficit storylines that focus on individual effort and skills which most of the organization is actively resisting.

Some leaders and staff like Octavia, Teodora, Bruce, Beverly, and Renata at times reproduced the color-blind, culture-blind and class-blind narratives that blame individuals vs. systems for their failure to succeed in the educational environment of the city. Often it is specifically mothers who are blamed when deficit narratives are produced through racial storylines (Nasir, Snyder, Shah, & Ross, 2012). In our society, with a capitalistic focus on productivity, the work and value of caregivers of any type is often invisible because it is not directly connected to tangible economic gains. Caregiving work, paid and unpaid, is also a distinctly gendered and racialized labor force. Women do more unpaid and paid care work than their male counterparts. According to a report from OXFAM, globally, "women undertake more than three-quarters of unpaid care and make up two-thirds of the paid care workforce" (International Labour Office, 2018 as cited in Oxfam International, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, unlike previous recessions, more women than men were pushed out of the workforce

into expanded unpaid roles due to childcare and school closures (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020)

Ultimately, in the United States, the caregiving work of women is also shockingly unsupported by basic public policy that most other wealthy nations have, including paid maternity/paternity leave, affordable and accessible childcare, ongoing financial support to ensure very young children have their basic needs met (Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland, & Yoshikawa, 2021). In reference to the United States' lack of supportive early childhood policies, Woodhouse (2008) says, "Children pay a high cost for our attachment to the myth of family autonomy and rugged individualism" (p. 153). Neighborhood Strong, in many ways, resists autonomy and individualism and recognizes the interdependence of families, neighbors, and nearby communities. In other ways, Neighborhood Strong, too, relies on unpaid and underpaid labor of women of color to do much of the care work built into their model. Many of the women of color who do the community engagement management roles stay in the role. Others, like Maxine, found that it was not sustainable. She said of her exhaustion on the job, "It all comes from trying to help somebody" (interview, March 8, 2021). She had already left her position for another job when we did this final interview.

When Bruce talked about "every mother" accessing prenatal care and reading to their babies as the way that the "the whole city changes in one generation", this exemplified the dominant deficit narrative that continues to put the onus on individuals (and mothers, specifically) instead of the unsupportive and unequal systems that moms and their babies are part of. Literacy, specifically taken up in particular ways (i.e., shared reading) by individual mothers, was discussed as a key to substantial economic, social, and structural change--mirroring the language Street (1995) uses to describe the "autonomous" model of literacy.

Success as defined by dominant culture is narrow and attainable only through specific kinds of cultural, social, and financial capital as determined by the storylines of capitalism, White supremacy, and patriarchy that have shaped our society (e.g., winners and losers, money=power, racialized scripts, individual meritocracy). Most community members, staff, leaders, and organizational structures at Neighborhood Strong actively resisted those scripts. For example, community members in chapters 4 and 5 defined success as happiness, independence, health, a life of satisfaction. Staff members and leaders in chapter 6 describe success as neighbors coming together to support kids, families with all the resources they need to thrive, and children who are emotionally and socially prepared for school.

The nature of the organization is such that it draws individuals together from within and outside of the city, of varying identities, to operate programs and support the functioning of the organization.

Neighborhood hubs meet the needs of the community by functioning at communities of practice and sites of cultural and linguistic brokering

When considering my second research question, which asked "how do neighborhood hubs enact the mission of the organization?," data revealed that strength across the neighborhood hubs was the strong relationships and trust that exists between staff and community members. Through a critical sociocultural lens, and with an eye to the MLS, these findings represent resistance to the neoliberal focus on individual achievement and self-sufficiency. Learning at the neighborhood hubs was mediated through relationships akin to communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) where the adults (both staff and community members) engaged in shared practices for the specific purpose of supporting the children in the community. Adult-focused programs expanded the efforts of the organization to support families holistically and gave

parents a much-needed space to process their own challenges together. Wenger (1998) says, "communities of practice develop around things that matter to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members' own understanding of what is important" (p. 2). As was evident in chapter 4 and 5, for families during the pandemic, what was important was to feel connection and support from other parents while learning new ways to support their own children.

Additionally, the community members were recognized as knowledgeable by staff and were invited to share their knowledge (e.g., Abril welcomed the sharing of linguistic knowledge such as words in different Spanish dialects) with staff and each other in ways that would create opportunities to support one another. This included sharing their skills with the community like Danielle teaching martial arts at the Dexter-Linwood hub. The staff integrated cultural and linguistic knowledge, which aligns with the *funds of knowledge* approach of Moll et al. (1992). Surprisingly, despite being present in general, the integration of cultural and linguistic practices were notably absent from most literacy programs observed. These findings demonstrate a paradox, where both things are true at once, between the general culture and practices of the neighborhood hubs and the culture and practices of the literacy programs.

The trusting relationships between staff and community members, as reflected by the community member interviews in chapters 4 and 5, were indicative of powerful family engagement strategies that resist and remove the expected power gaps between family and staff (Stefanski, Valli, Jacobson, 2016). The ability for community members to find connection with other families is an important finding and underscores the mission of the organization as a place where families (not just children) are supported and where they belong, which is in alignment with family engagement literature (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Mapp, 2013). Helena, a mother at the Southwest hub described how the community at the hub functions, "*nos*

*entendemos, nos apoyamos y aprendemos más/*we understand each other, we support each other, and we learn more". Danielle, a community member at Dexter-Linwood said, "You feel like this is your space. You're supposed to be there", describing a sense of community and belonging present within the hub.

The need for cultural and linguistic brokers across the spaces speaks to the multicultural and multilingual staff and community members that the organization serves. Harmony, the Senior Community Engagement Manager, described her own translating information from the global team to the managers and from the managers to the global team; Teodora described literally translating information at meetings from English to Spanish for her mostly Spanish-speaking staff. Within the neighborhood hubs, the Southwest staff were the points of contact for the Spanish-speaking community members and often the translators of curriculum and facilitation. In these ways the staff acted as cultural brokers and collaborators within the institution which are strong features of critical family engagement (Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; Ishimaru et. al, 2016; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007).

Neighborhood hubs were sites of meeting needs, especially building relationships and trust, and then as sites of learning. Communities of practice theory supports that members of the group (families, staff, literacy facilitators) engaged in learning that was mediated by relationships in the space and related to a common goal of kid success. For instance, in reference to the tutors for her children, Giselle from the Southwest hub, said,

> *en la pandemia ellos tuvieron una conexión con sus tutoras increíble que hasta lloraron cuando se terminó el programa y las clases iban a terminar/*in the pandemic they had an incredible connection with their tutors so much that [her children] cried when the program was over, and their classes were going to end (interview, August 24, 2021).

Additionally, cultural brokering was evident within and across Neighborhood Strong hubs and the organization due to the need for making connections across spaces and to collaborate across differences in identities, cultures, and languages. One such example is when Harmony said, "I'm translating what's going on from top to bottom and bottom to top" describing her role an inter-organizational cultural broker between global and manager (community-facing) spaces in the organization (interview, September 21, 2020). In much of Chapter 4, the data shows how Teodora acts as a linguistic broker for families within literacy programs and for her staff within organizational spaces. In these ways, the collective and collaborative approaches to engaging families and serving the community reflect liberatory possibilities of community-based educational spaces (Baldrige et al., 2017) and build on the rich history of community-led educational spaces in the city (Hetrick, Wilson, Reece, & Hanna, 2020).

Context-neutral literacy programs and facilitators

As I considered the second part of the research question 2, "How do literacy programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?" data revealed that the content and delivery of most of the literacy programs was de-contextualized and unresponsive to the community despite happening within a very community-focused space. Because of the attention to the specific neighborhood community in so many other ways, I was surprised by the lack of cultural and linguistic responsivity in the literacy program data. As Teodora explained when she reflected on programs offered at the Southwest site, the literacy programs were "not ridden with our culture". This made the literacy programming seem distant and disconnected from the norms of the neighborhood hub which attracted families from all over the metro Detroit region because of their commitment to the heritage of the Latinx community and access to community and support predominantly using the Spanish language. Community members noted the frustration of

attending when programs were translated. Simple tweaks in planning and facilitation would make the programs more accessible and responsive to the Southwest community. For instance, if the play group discussed in Chapter 4 had been structured in a co-facilitation model, Teodora's role could have been less stressful and more supportive of the content of the class, and the families would have had easily accessible material. Understanding Teodora's role as facilitator and not just translator could better position her to be the cultural and linguistic broker needed in that space (Ishimaru et al. 2016). If there is limited capacity for Teodora, a simple work around for the program would be to use the Spanish language versions of the books *Rainbow Fish* (*El Pez Arcoiris*) and *Barnyard Dance* (*Danza del Corral*), both of which are easy to access via YouTube.

At the Dexter-Linwood site, the community engagement managers developed some cultural connections in the programs they facilitated in small ways: choice of books by African American authors and illustrators, the addition of dancing (to a popular songs) in each of the lessons, the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and engaging with community members with familiarity and enthusiasm.

The example of community pushback about including a book with a depiction of a Black boy dressed as a mermaid, as discussed in Chapter 6, demonstrates how programs that are offered in a generalized way, from the perspective of a partner (in this case, a university professor) was mis-aligned with the desires of the community. The presence of the book put strain on the trust that was built between community and staff. *Julian is a Mermaid* is a popular title which won awards for the illustrations (Klaus Flugge Prize) and the Stonewall Book Award for books "exceptional merit relating to the gay/ lesbian/ bisexual/ transgender experience"

(American Library Association, 2022). An outside facilitator or program developer does not know how this title will 1) be taught/handled or 2) how it will be received by the community.

Interestingly, we are in a collective moment of heightened book challenging and banning, and the book that topped the American Library Association chart from 2018-2021 was a book called *George* by Alex Gino about a fourth-grade transgender girl, Melissa (https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10) The tension over including LGBTQI+ stories in literacy programs is not unique to Neighborhood Strong, but it indicative of the need for conversation with community members and staff to determine how to bring awareness and consciousness to the decision-making regarding literacy programs, facilitations, and materials.

The presence of the book about a young boy dressing up resisted some of the heteronormative storylines that some vocal community members wanted to enforce. This event called into question the role of Neighborhood Strong in creating liberatory spaces for all community members, even gender non-conforming children and families.

The literacy program observations revealed some of the challenges of the structure of the organization including capacity and skill building to develop programs. In many ways, literacy programs were chosen to check a box for the literacy-focused organization, and fell into the category of perceived-neutral, school-like programs at best and "deficit-oriented" programs at worst (Rodriguez-Brown, 2010). Neighborhood Strong was originally designed to be a connector between the community and program-delivering organizations who wanted to work with the community. The rapid growth of the organization created demand for programs that the Community Engagement staff and volunteers filled.

The availability and presence of volunteers went up during the pandemic because of the ease of virtually attending programs. This cut down on the notoriously long waitlist for tutoring, but it also brought many outsiders into community members' homes across the city. In many ways the neighborhood hubs created safe, culturally affirming spaces for families and kids, but in my findings, I noted that literacy programs were coming across as context-neutral. A context-neutral program links back to Street's (1995) notion of autonomous literacy programs–programs that offer literacy as a way to "lift those who learn it out of their socially embedded context"(p. 79), but as Larson (1996) adds, "if literacy is represented as a context-neutral skill, then it fulfills the political purposes of those in power to maintain a position of superiority by marginalizing other forms of literate knowledge"(p. 440).

When volunteers come from zip codes from outside the city (or outside of the communities being served within the city), Neighborhood Strong leaders and staff should be aware that it is likely they are operating with dominant deficit storylines (McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017; Nasir & Shah, 2011) that affect how they perceive children and families like colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016). Haddix (2017) said, "any goal to improve literacy education for all students must involve a close look at the educators charged with delivering literacy curriculum with equity-minded, culturally relevant, and anti-racist pedagogies" (p.142). Without a focused organizational resistance to this default thinking, it's likely that many volunteers come into the Neighborhood Strong space with little understanding of the systemic challenges that families face.

Overall, the literacy programs mostly reproduced mainstream context-neutral literacy practices, valuing school-based notions of success as evident in the literacy program data shared across chapters 4 and 5. The programs offered to neighborhoods were most often *not* culturally

or linguistically responsive and were reminiscent of the traditional skills-based, "neutral" literacy programming offered in schools. In this way, Neighborhood Strong literacy programs were sites of reproduction of the narrow view of literacy and success that has ignored the specificity and importance of race, culture, language, and power in literacy.

A loving organization but a need for critical care and critical consciousness

In response to my third research question, which asked, "What organizational culture and structures support or limit the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of kid success and literacy?" the data revealed that the organizational culture of loving represents both resistance to and reinforcement of societal power imbalances. An organizational commitment to care and love is supported through a strong organizational culture and structures. Love was invoked by all study participants who were interviewed and also apparent in organizational artifacts across the study as seen across interviews in Chapters 4 and 5 and interviews and documents in Chapter 6. A culture of love resists the frame of rugged individualism by embracing collaboration and care. With that said, care and love *without* critical consciousness or awareness of structural inequality is harmful. This is particularly true for the neighborhood staff, notably all women of Color, who are doing the emotionally laborious work of relationship building and supporting community members who are most likely impacted by the oppressive effects of a pandemic (such as poverty, food insecurity, mental health crises, job loss, and the oppressive carceral systems of policing and immigration).

Coming together "across zip codes" requires a different kind of care, trust, and vulnerability, and there are currently no structures in place to ensure a minimum level of critical consciousness across the organization. The need for implementation of critical care within Neighborhood Strong is key. Cooper (2009) defines critical care as "not just a common, altruistic

sentiment but a power-laden activity" meant to resist inequity (p. 383). Wilson (2015b, p.10) describes the roots of critical care as ideas that, "move beyond one-on-one relationships to emphasize the importance of one seeking to rectify injustice in socially and culturally relevant ways given children's and communities' needs and experiences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Wilson, 2015)".   Data indicated that love is a consistent presence at Neighborhood Strong, yet it was unclear whether there was a critical view of power within that sense of love.

Leading with and without critical consciousness

Data showed that the organizational culture of servant leadership resists the individualized and production-focused goals of neoliberal culture, as evident in the discussion of the importance of loving relationships and being a learning organization in chapter 6. Without individual critical consciousness and awareness of systems of oppression, though, leaders could uphold power dynamics instead of resist them. The danger of nonprofit work without a critical lens is the possibility of leading without attention to the systems of oppression present in the lives of community members and staff. Without this careful attention or the authentic commitment to service, servant leadership could reinforce and reproduce the dominant cultural norms of (White) saviorism, missionary work, and paternalistic educational spaces. Being a savior means "you want to help others, but you are not open to guidance from those you want to help" (Flaherty, 2016, Ch. 1, para 30), which is antithetical to the characteristics of a servant leader.

Developing a sense of love and belonging is a foundation of doing transformational work but it is just that- the foundation on which critically conscious work needs to be done.

This was evident at times in chapters 4 and 5 when community engagement managers spoke of the families' language development. Teodora said, of parents, "they're not really building the children's vocabulary for them to have success in life" (interview, November 13, 2020) and Octavia said, "a lot of people are too dependent on the school system doing the work for them" (interview, April 29, 2021) referring to parents, in her opinion, not working to develop literacy in the home before young children enter school. This was also evident in Chapter 6 in the reflections of Bruce and Beverly who insinuated that Detroit parents aren't already empowered and don't have expectations or demands of the educational system without the influence of Neighborhood Strong, demonstrating a real lack of awareness of the history of education in the city and everyday individual and collective resistance from families.

Also in Chapter 6, Bruce laid out his theory of change, suggesting that "if every mother does that [reads] to every baby, the whole city changes in one generation" (interview, January 6, 2021). In the words of Pollack (2012), he is engaging deficit narrative that "blames the parents (especially the mother) and supposed cultural deficiencies for the child's learning problems" (p. 96), but in this case mothers aren't just responsible for their child's learning but the fate of the city itself. In this vision the individual, not even family units, but (African American and Latinx) *mothers*, hold the responsibility for the fate of the city. These examples demonstrate a need for developing critical consciousness at every level of staff and leadership. As Benson (2016) says,

> one task for critical educators and researchers is to weaken neoliberalism by historicizing it, injecting into our work as teachers and scholars a critical historical consciousness that destabilizes the naturalizing tendencies of dominant discourses and thereby redistributes vulnerability upward to neoliberal racial capitalism's elite architects and beneficiaries (para 38).

The quote above highlights the importance not just of critical consciousness but a critical *historical* consciousness which involves a deep understanding of the self but also of the city across time.

Individual development, sharing power, and unrestricted funding in a learning organization

The emphasis on being a learning organization is reliant on listening to the community (which NS continues to try to systematize) and is critical for the continued development of accessible, community-responsive, and liberatory educational spaces. Staffing that hires for love also requires continued development of other skills and other knowledge that is considered important in the institutional space.

The effects of neoliberal policies that have exacerbated poverty and market-based education in Detroit also makes even a community learning space inaccessible for some. Despite being located within neighborhoods and oftentimes relevant and needed, the services and programs offered at Neighborhood Strong may continue to be out of reach for families who are overwhelmed by the stressors and challenges of daily life in a pandemic.

Despite some of the other ways community members enact resistance to programs of the organization, school-like literacy presented to communities through the hubs was perceived as neutral (even when schools were not). The data show that families have not often pushed back on the societal frame (adapted from McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017) of "whose literacies are privileged" and neither have the leaders or staff of the organization. Across the data was an absence of a critical lens while looking at the literacy programs, apart from some community members at Southwest who expressed frustration about the lack of accessibility of the programs and materials in their home language, expressing resistance to the English language norm in a

bidirectional manner (McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017). Largely, the literacy programs, facilitators, and volunteers were accepted, and often revered, without a critical examination of the programs or methods for engaging with the community.

Finally, the data showed that the organization's commitment to at least fifty percent unrestricted funding (which I connect to the theme of "listening" in Chapter 6) employs a tool of market capitalism— the power of money—to support the goals of the community and the organization. Ultimately, the organization is both reliant on and resistant to the power of money in the form of philanthropy because the organization relies on unrestricted funding to keep growing and they also resist restricted funding that would decrease the ability of the organization to be representatives of the community members.

The Detroit educational ecosystem and Neighborhood Strong viewed through the multilevel sociopolitical framework

Building from the analysis above, I developed the table below to demonstrate how the Neighborhood Strong organization as an educational space is both reproducing and resisting the dominant storylines associated with a society built on White supremacist, capitalistic, patriarchal norms.

Table 7.

Analytical highlights organized by research question

Analytical Highlights by Research Question		
MSF level	**Reproduction**	**Resistance**
Social	• RQ1: Some study participants reproduced deficit storylines and focused on individual actions vs. using critical consciousness to conceptualize success	• RQ1: Most participants described holistic views of success and resisted the notion of individualism

Institutional	• RQ3: Within the organization, women of color are disproportionately responsible for doing the emotionally heavy labor of building, maintaining, and being first point of contact in relationships with community members • RQ3: Care is an important value and part of organizational culture but is not viewed or described through a lens of power. The organization is loving but there is a lack of critical care	• RQ2: Collective and collaborative approaches to engaging families and serving the community reflect liberatory possibilities of CBES and build on the rich history of community-led educational spaces in the city. • RQ3: An organizational commitment to care and love is supported through a strong organizational culture and structures.
Cultural	• RQ2a: Literacy programs were often sites of reproduction of the narrow view of literacy and success that has ignored the specificity and importance of race,culture, language, and power in literacy	• RQ3: A system of cultural and linguistic brokering across neighborhoods and the umbrella organization resisted the notion that there is one type of cultural knowledge that is valued
Individual	• RQ3: Leading without individual and shared critical consciousness reinforces the dominant culture of saviorism, missionary work, paternalistic educational spaces historically designed for communities of color.	• RQ2: Communities of practice theory supports that individual members of the group (families, staff, literacy facilitators) engaged in learning that was mediated by relationships in the space and related to a common goal of kid success.

In the following sections, I review each of the levels of the multilevel sociological framework with a Detroit and Neighborhood Strong-specific focus. Drawing on the work of McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) allowed me to incorporate social theories of learning and literacy within an ecological framework that was developed to contextualize learning within a sociopolitical and racialized environment

Neighborhood Strong at the social level

The social level of the MSF represents the "dominant socio-historical ideologies or discourses that physically and socially stratify our society" (McKinney de Royston & Nasir, p. 262). In Chapters 1 and 2, I outlined the ways in which the dominant discourses and history in Detroit have shaped the educational ecosystem in the city.

In Detroit neighborhoods, this includes a well-documented history of systemic neighborhood segregation through red-lining and racial covenants, violent White resistance to integrating neighborhoods and workplaces, the destruction of an important Black neighborhood and business district to build expressways, and the deindustrialization and disinvestment from businesses across decades.

Georgakas (1975, p.1) described the 1967 Uprising as "the most widespread and costly of hundreds of urban rebellions throughout the United States". The Dexter-Linwood hub is located in one of the most affected parts of the city which struggled to rebuild after the devastation of 1967. In January 2017, the *Detroit News* reported that the storied Central High School, now called the Central Collegiate Academy, would be absorbing 600 students from the building next door, Durfee Middle School starting the next school year. According to the article, Detroit Public Community School District decided to close Durfee because it was on the list of the bottom 5% of schools in the state, which is measured according to state testing data. As parents and newly elected school board members voiced their concern for another school closure, the fate of the Durfee building was already sealed:

> Chris Lambert, the president and CEO of Life Remodeled, said the nonprofit has inked a 20-year, $1-a-year renewable lease with the school district for Durfee. The nonprofit will organize a renovation that will cost up to $5 million — funded mostly by donations of cash and volunteer labor — to turn the 176,000-square-foot building into a space where

small businesses can grow, connect with each other and receive support. (Zaniewski,

2014, January 5)

Many scholars point to how neoliberal policies have affected public goods and services including the educational systems of post-industrial cities like Chicago and Detroit (Green, Sanchez, & Castro, 2019; Lipman, 2013; Wilson, 2015). This includes the ways in which traditional public-school closures and the opening of privatized and market-based charter schools have coincided in Detroit. As the role of the government and public is minimized, more room is made for the free market which includes social entrepreneurs, like Life Remodeled and Neighborhood Strong. With Life Remodeled paying $1 a year and other investors and entrepreneurs securing heavily devalued homes and buildings for cheap while families lose their homes due to over-taxation and foreclosure (Hackman, 2014, October 22) There is a real sense of erasure of the school and neighborhood communities that exist(ed) in those spaces.

Spence (2015) describes how the neoliberal turn led to a focus on government operating in a more business-like, efficient, cost-cutting manner. He says, "the very idea of 'social entrepreneurship' revolves around the notion that we can somehow harness the wonders of the market to deal with social ills like poverty, hunger, and homelessness" (p. 10). He described how this model was used during the financial crisis in Detroit and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, saying,

> The entire concept of social entrepreneurship relies upon the notion that innovation, creativity, and energy are best mobilized by the application of market principles, particularly in crisis cases like Detroit and New Orleans. It misses the crucial role business principles played in generating the crisis, and the role government should play in solving the crisis. (p. 49)

Neoliberal policies have stalled progress toward the pursuit of the common good. Consequently, communities in neighborhoods like Dexter-Linwood and Southwest have been vulnerable to the reconfiguration and loss that comes with school closure, especially when those schools were not under local control.

Figure 7.1

Neighborhood Strong at the social level
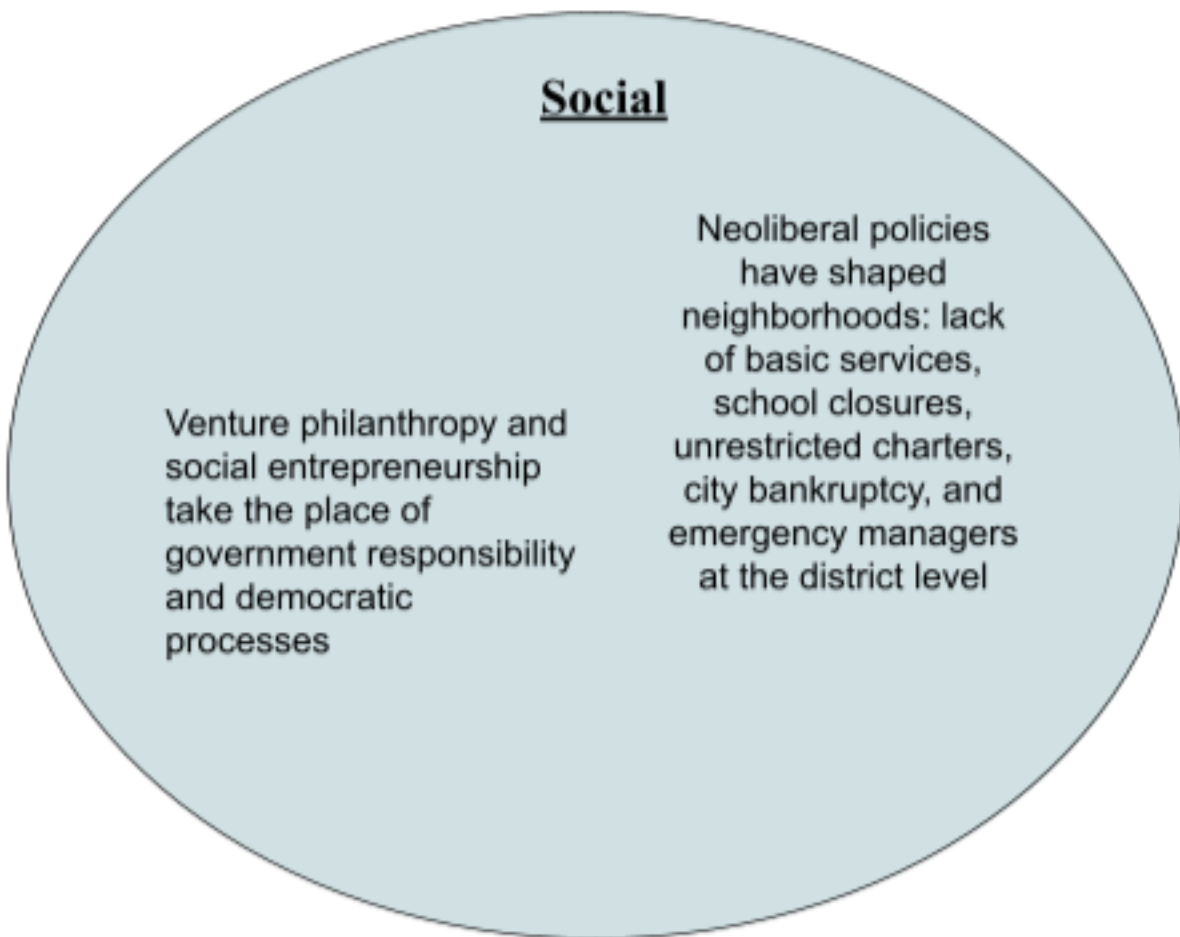
Neighborhood Strong at the institutional level

Learning and development are mediated through institutional sites such as classrooms, schools, and community-based educational spaces (McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017). It's necessary to view these spaces within attention to power dynamics and see them as "spaces of

marginalization, positioning, and potentially, empowerment where certain ways of being, knowledge, skills, and networks are perceived as legitimate and others are devalued or perceived as contradictory or oppositional" (Nasir & McKinney de Royston, 2013 as cited in McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017). The institutional level allows us to think about organizations and how they support family-focused spaces.

In my analysis I view the umbrella organization of Neighborhood Strong as its own institution as well as each of the neighborhood hubs on their own. The culture of servant leadership across the umbrella organization infused the working environment with love and care focused on building strong, personalized relationships and attending to individual staff needs. Similarly, the same attention to love and care was reported by the community members regarding Octavia, Teodora, other staff, and volunteer tutors at the neighborhood hubs.

This spirit of care is balanced with the quick-moving atmosphere of social enterprise, as Ellen described, "with startup entrepreneurship, you will see that you reach a point where you have to be more, I don't want to say institutional, but your systems have to be different" (interview, September 10, 2020). As the organization has grown they have experienced the pressure to move away from the people-centric model and into a more institutional structured model.

McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) note the existence of colorblind frames at the institutional level and that is present in the analysis of the data in this study as well. In some ways the organization attends to racial and ethnic composition of the community by "hiring from the neighborhoods" and in other ways, like programming, there was a sense of culture and colorblind selection of curriculum and facilitators. In Chapter 6, Hope describes when community members pushed back on a culture blind, colorblind program saying, "…the

feedback that we received from participants was that it wasn't culturally relevant. The curriculum wasn't, as well as the facilitator. And so a lot of the information was not received well. It was... Some of it was culturally insensitive" (Interview, October 6, 2020). The institution failed to initially ensure that the program that was being offered was appropriate for the community but also the institutional commitment to listening and learning allowed for the program director, Hope, to advocate for changes with the program partner.

Figure 7.3

*Neighborhood Strong at the institutional level*
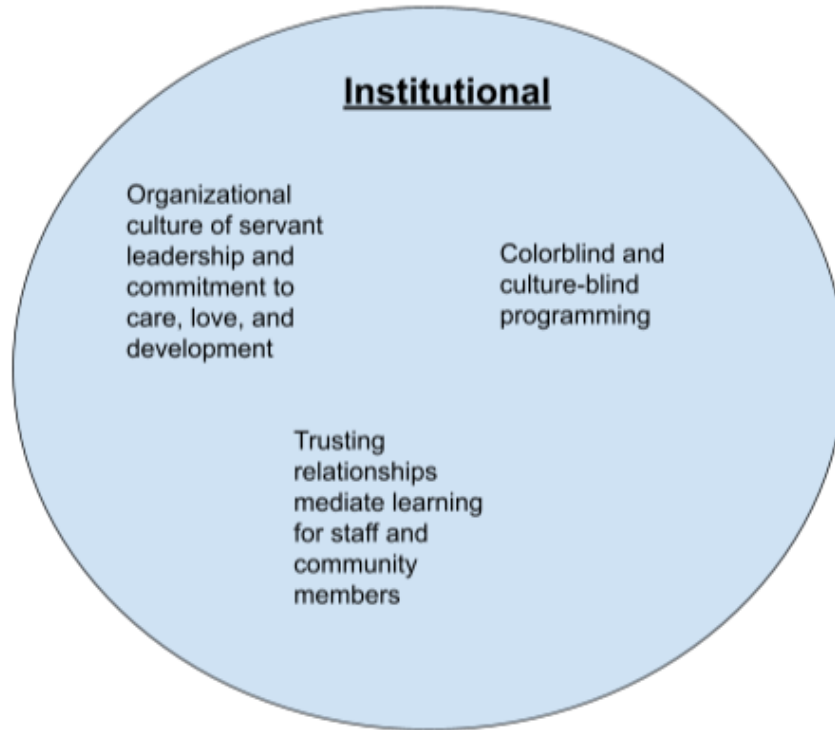
Neighborhood Strong at the cultural level

The cultural level of the multilevel sociopolitical framework attends to "which types of social and cultural practices are valued and privileged and the extent to which students' home

and neighborhood practices are welcomed/attended to in school and classroom life or are marginalized as irrelevant or less sophisticated (Nasir & McKinney de Royston, 2013 cited in McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017, p. 268). In the case of Neighborhood Strong, the students include the adult community members who are participating in adult classes or with their children as well as the children attending literacy programs.

As described in Chapter 4, the Southwest neighborhood hub invited participation from all around the metro Detroit area due to the Spanish-speaking staff. The staff at this hub are all bilingual and the home language of the participants appears to be "valued and privileged" (p. 268) but, when it comes to programs, especially literacy programs that I observed, much of the language of instruction was English, including some programs with a staff member translating. As noted earlier, a paradox exists in these spaces where at an organizational and hub level, there is awareness and respect of language and culture, but at the literacy program level, there is not.

Throughout the literacy program observations in Chapters 4 and 5, it was noted that programs were not designed for either the Latinx or African American families, leading to a sense of irrelevance and marginalization, particularly for the Spanish-speaking participants.

Cultural

The community members' knowledge and culture is valued within the hub

Community members language and literacy were not attended to through literacy programs
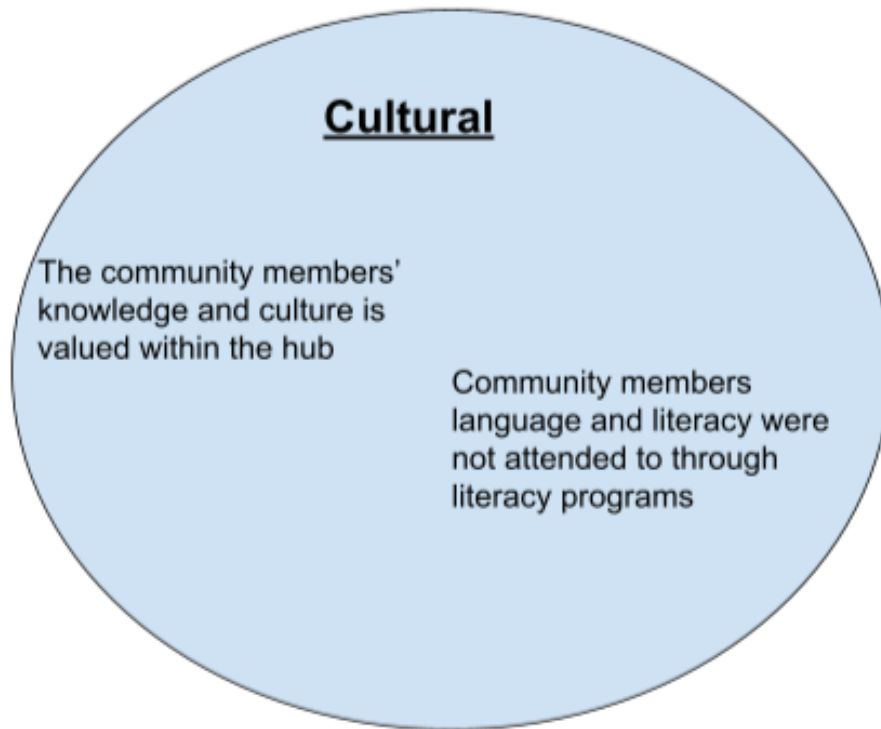
Neighborhood Strong at the individual level

McKinney de Royston and Nasir (2017) describe this as "the level in which racial or ethnic identities, academic or domain-specific identities, and professional identities intertwine with processes of learning and development" (p. 268). In Chapters 4 and 5, the data suggested that the neighborhood hubs helped to create a community of practice for the adult community members, Helena said about opportunities to connect with other mothers, "we support each other, and we learn more" (interview, August 26, 2021) and "I got some new friends. This is so cool" (Prentice interview, September 9, 2021). The community members, mostly parents, are able to engage in a community of practice which supports their parenting and also their understanding of themselves and their children.

A neoliberal frame "places limitations on individual identity and learning by who is positioned within a school or classroom as a 'good' student" (McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017, p. 269). To extend that notion, I argue that the predetermined ideas of what is a "good" parent, according to dominant narratives, limits program offerings for the Latinx and African American community Neighborhood Strong serves. Deficit storylines, including those that undergird the LENA Start program that both Teodora and Octavia seemed to echo, focus on ways families are failing to prepare children for school success. Some family literacy research such as Jarret and Coba-Rodriguez (2017) point to the ways that low-income African American families' literacy practices—evident in a networked "*division of literacy labor*" — were unseen and undervalued because they fell outside of the range of home literacy practices that were expected.
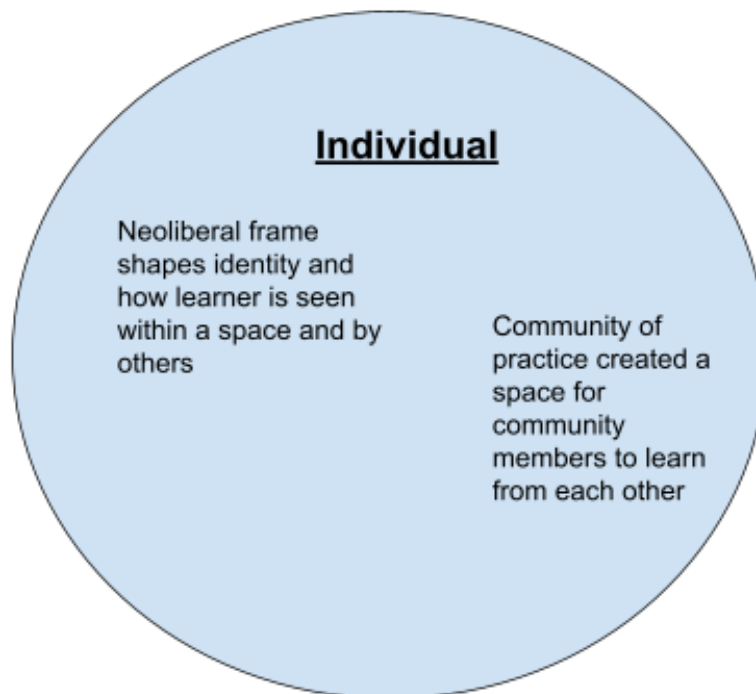
In this dissertation, I focused on the Neighborhood Strong organization and two of its neighborhood hubs. I answered questions related to the mission of kid success, literacy programs, and the culture and structures of the organization. Using a multilevel sociopolitical

frame to analyze the data, I found a variety of ways the organization, and individuals

representing the organization, both reproduce and resist dominant racial and cultural storylines in

the organization.

Recommendations

In the coming paragraphs, I recommend actions for Neighborhood Strong specifically,

the field in general, and areas of future research.

Recommendations for Neighborhood Strong

In my exploration of the organization, I saw that Neighborhood Strong had strong

organizational culture and family engagement practices. There were also some ways in which the

stated hopes and desires of community members and staff were misaligned with some of the

school-literacy focused notions of success on their website. A practical way to tackle this issue

would be to engage a representative group of leaders, staff, and community members from all

neighborhoods in their understanding and vision of the mission of the organization by asking:

What does kid success mean to you? How does literacy fit into kid success? This effort should be

participatory and community-led by the leaders at the neighborhood hubs. Center discussions in

of leadership around the needs and desires of community members and their visions for kid

success. Using the information collected, the group could critically evaluate how well

community members' visions are represented across the organizational structures including the

guiding questions and intentions on the website such as "what if every child was kindergarten

ready" and "we will assure grade level reading by third grade" which both center around school-

like notions of success. Identify the ways in which the organization is replicating a context-free

model of success vs viewing families and neighborhoods as operating within complex and

interrelated systems.

As part of this review of the mission, it will be important for leadership teams including

the board of directors to critically evaluate how they and other stakeholders understand the mission and determine how identity and power are related to different levels of critical consciousness present in the work of the organization.

In order to create alignment between intentions and practice of literacy programs, NS should hire a community-focused researcher or practitioner with literacy expertise to conduct a literacy program audit to begin to understand how programs are/are not aligned with the shared mission of the organization. This person should develop a criterion for critical and community-responsive literacy program selection by incorporating and drawing upon context-specific literacy practices such as the Historically Responsive Literacy which was built from studying the history of Black literary societies (Muhammad, 2020), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and *funds of knowledge* (Moll and Greenburg, 1990).

During this literacy audit, the researcher should identify strengths/areas for improvement for selecting community-responsive literacy programs by identifying strengths as well as areas for improvement for facilitation of programs. Until this point, it seems many of the programs were accepted as partners because they broadly addressed literacy. In the auditing process, it will be important to find or develop culturally and linguistically responsive programs for the populations being served. This should include aligning the instruction and materials with the family's home languages and preferences. Additionally, attention to culturally and historically responsive literacy programs, particularly focused on the rich history of the city of Detroit would be an excellent fit for the organization overall. Finally, there should be elements of literacy programs that promote the development of critical consciousness of children and families through meaningful literacy offerings. For instance, Lindsey (2021) reported on a study of a virtual Black-centric summer literacy program in an urban area. The program used a curriculum

focused on early reading skills and easily decodable texts delivered by teachers who were trained in culturally relevant practices. Additionally, read aloud lessons featured Black authors and characters, in alignment with the cultural knowledge and racial backgrounds of the students. The findings of the study supported a claim that children could make literacy gains with a culturally relevant literacy program and, importantly, "children could demonstrate some improvement in their budding racial attitudes, even within a program that spent 70% of its time in explicit phonics and decoding instruction" (p.104). Literacy, and family literacy, programs can be spaces of not just literacy skills, but a place of culture and language affirming, historically responsive instruction.

As an example of deep family engagement, Neighborhood Strong should find ways to partner with local schools and teachers to work across spaces to support local schools and community members. Additionally, the organizational culture at Neighborhood Strong puts them in a position to be a leader in utilizing a framework that Safir and Dugan (2021) call *"street data"* which they describe as data that "emerges from human interaction, taking us down to the ground level to see, hear, and engage with the children and adults in our school communities— particularly those at the margins" (p.19). Drawing from Indigenous and Afro-centric ways of knowing, *street data* fundamentally rejects the narrow view of success and is in alignment with the families and staff at Neighborhood Strong who see success as holistic and community-dependent. The authors remind us of how education systems have failed to truly focus on the holistic growth of children, "for all our talk of being student centered, we have bought into a success paradigm that robs many children of their voices, marginalizes their gifts, and prioritizes measurement and incremental improvement over learning and transformation" (p. 12). Neighborhood Strong, as a community-based educational space, has the flexibility and

opportunity to shift that paradigm in their programs but they will have to resist the pressures of traditional data collection and evaluation. Neighborhood Strong could be a leader among education nonprofits that focuses on contextualized, community-informed, and holistic views of kid success.

Recommendations for the field

Practitioners in community-based educational spaces can learn from some of the successful ways Neighborhood Strong committed to a culture focused on the strengths of community members and staff. To emulate their model, it's key to ensure clear expectations of culture, alignment of values and programs, and actual opportunity for two-way communication and knowledge sharing between staff and community members. At Neighborhood Strong, connection is key: hire for love, hire from the community you are serving, create opportunities for building relationships and respect the role of cultural and linguistic brokering.

Based on this study, there are ways to expand upon Neighborhood Strong's model as well. It's key to understand the historical, cultural, and educational contexts of the community in order to engage in literacy programs with community members in meaningful ways. Many community-based educational spaces are focused on serving communities that are multiply affected by systems of oppression in our society. If an organization is interested in serving the community with literacy programs, there is an obligation to resist the narrative that tells us to see autonomous literacy offerings as mechanisms for large-scale economic or structural change. It's also imperative to resist the view that the actions of individuals, namely mothers, is responsible for disinvestment and disenfranchisement of neighborhoods because of the ways she did or did not read storybooks to her children. Maintaining a critical stance is key because, as Compton-Lilly (2022) explains, "fundamental challenges—racism, sexism, socioeconomic status—that

define life for many people who are recipients of these programs, are often ignored while attention focuses on *fixing* families and their literacy practices" (p.65). An organization seeking to serve families with literacy programs must beware the tendency to focus on individuals and not the systems within which they operate.

Recommendations for future research

A prominent missing piece in this project was the voices, opinions, dreams, and experiences of the youth for which this organization is designed. The perspective of children would have given an even fuller picture of the organization, the relationships that children may value through this organization, and how they experience literacy programs from a variety of facilitators and volunteers. Further research should center youth voices as key stakeholders in this work.

An appropriate next step in studying this organization, or one like it, would be to begin a longitudinal study of participating families across time and educational spaces. This type of study would help to conceptualize how families learn, develop, and move through different educational spaces and across time.

Any further family literacy research needs to be done with a lens toward systemic issues that the field has been silent on. Family literacy has experienced "an enduring silence related to racism, privilege, and injustice" which has served the research community and not necessarily the communities of the families studied(Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2019, p. 285). Because family literacy and family engagement are interconnected in such a powerful way, studies that relate to this intersection can be powerful tools to exemplify family and community resistance to deficit dominant storylines.

<div align="center">

Conclusions

</div>

Significance

This case study explored a quickly growing community-based non-profit in the city of Detroit. In focusing on literacy programs within specific neighborhood hubs, I was able to explore the specific historical and contemporary context of the educational space which served either Latinx or African American populations. By applying a critical sociocultural lens within a multilevel sociopolitical ecological model, I was able to explore the contradictions, nuances, strengths, and weaknesses of the organization. The complexity of the organizational model is that it is situated within a city with a long history of deeply inequitable housing and schooling systems and an equally long history of community resistance (especially from the African American community) to such systems.

An unresolvable tension I felt doing this work was the question of how can an organization do truly community-responsive work within a system defined by White supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy? Some of the contradictions and insights of the work that were salient within the Detroit context include housing, philanthropy, and neighborhood growth.

In Detroit, the decades of home foreclosure and blight has made it relatively cheap for Neighborhood Strong to purchase the homes that become the neighborhood hubs. This crisis was exacerbated specifically for homeowners of color who were victims of predatory lending leading up to the 2008 Great Recession and bursting of the housing bubble. Over decades, systemic systems of oppression and neoliberal forces first broke down what was commonly understood to be a shared understanding of neighborhoods and community and essentially created the need for an organization such as this to purchase and provide space and programs for community building.

Additionally, philanthropy has been complicit in collecting wealth and then becoming the determiner of who will be granted small portions of this wealth. There is a history of

colonization, institutionalized racism, and paternalism related to philanthropy and the tension is that the model of the organization relies on this exact type of unrestricted funding to maintain its commitment to "listening" to the community and being flexible in the work they do.

It's exciting to see how the organization is developing throughout the city, it appears to be meeting a real need within neighborhoods. There is a wariness to this idea of growth and how it is viewed from a Detroiter perspective which often includes stories like Danielle's demolished childhood home, gentrification, and skyrocketing downtown rent. This compared to how growth is viewed from a business model perspective of regeneration or development of the city in an opportunistic way. It feels like there is a both/and feeling where Detroiters and investors, businesspeople, and philanthropists may be able to coexist in this city, but without a clear examination of history, identities, and power it may always seem like Detroit, particularly the educational ecosystem of the city, is simply a playground for venture philanthropists and billionaires to shape and reshape as they please.

Families want what is best for their children. One of the things that I learned that Neighborhood Strong does well is engage in deep relationships with children, families, and community members. But even organizations that recognize and value families' hopes for their children can fail to fully honor it if it isn't a focus of programming. Family literacy programs are excellent sites for engaging families in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. Without sustained attention to creating responsive literacy programs that resist dominant narratives about the community, the default will continue to be the hegemony of colorblind and culture blind instruction.

Care and love need to be rooted in an unwavering commitment to changing the neoliberal and racist systems of oppression and inequity that have shaped the Detroit. Any staff of

organizations, social enterprises, or volunteers who enter into work in the city need to develop a critical consciousness about the role of philanthropy and business in Detroit's educational ecosystem, while also learning from and supporting families and communities with critical care. Developing a sense of love and belonging is a foundation of doing transformational work but it is just that—the foundation on which critically conscious work needs to be done.

Appendices

Appendix A

Community Member Interview Protocol

NOTE: The following questions are a list of questions that may be asked over 1 interview session. Given that the interviews will be semi-structured, that I will be collecting data from other sources, and that participants may have limited availability, I will not be asking each participant all listed questions.

Guiding Research Questions

1. **What is "kid success" according to community members, staff, and leadership, and how does (family) literacy fit into this mission?**
2. **How does each neighborhood hub enact the mission of the organization?**
   a. **How do (family) literacy practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?**
1. **What organizational culture and structures are in place to support the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of "kid success" and (family) literacy?**

<u>General Questions</u>

1. **How and when did you become involved with Brilliant Detroit**?
   a. Why do you continue to participate at this site?
   b. Do you have children who participate in the programs?
      i. What age(s) are your children?
   c. Have any programs or events been impactful for your and/or your family?
      i. If so, which programs or events? Please give an example of how they were impactful.
      ii. If not, please explain.
   d. How would you describe how you and/or your family feel while in this space?
      i. Please describe a time when you felt this way.
2. Have there been times when you have felt invited to contribute your knowledge and ideas at this site?
   a. If so, please give an example.
3. Have there been times when you do not feel welcome to bring your whole self to the site/program?
   a. If so, what do you think made you feel unwelcome?
   b. If you feel comfortable recalling this situation, please give an example.
4. Brilliant Detroit's mission is to build "kid success" neighborhoods. In your own words, describe what the term "kid success" means to you.

a. How do you, as a community member, support (your version) of a "kid success" mission in this neighborhood? (If their version is different) Review BD's mission and then ask: From your perspective, do you think there are ways BD could, or should, expand their version of "kid success" to better include the perspective of community members?
      i. In your opinion, is anything missing from a focus on early education, family support, and health?
5. Do you live in the neighborhood where you attend programming at Brilliant Detroit? Another Detroit neighborhood?
    a. How do you think your personal identity and history inform your participation at this site?
      i. For instance, do you identify as a Detroiter? If so, how does that identity inform your participation at the site?
      ii. How does your race, ethnicity, and culture inform your participation at this site?
      iii. How does (do) the language(s) you speak inform your participation at this site?
      iv. Are there any other identities that inform your participation at this site? (ex: religion, occupation, role of immigration in your life, family role such as parent/grandparent/aunt/uncle)
    b. If you are not from Detroit: Where are you from? How did you find out about Brilliant Detroit? How do you think your perspective from outside of the city informs/influences participation?
      i. How do you think your personal identity and history experiences inform your participation at this site?
6. For instance, do you identify as a Detroiter (even if you live outside of the city)? If so, how does that identity inform your participation at the site?
7. How does your race, ethnicity, and culture inform your participation at this site?
8. How does (do) the language(s) you speak inform your participation at this site?
9. Are there any other identities that inform your participation at this site? (ex: religion, occupation, role of immigration in your life, family role such as parent/grandparent/aunt/uncle)
10. How do you describe the _____ (SW/DL) neighborhood?
11. What are some important, or significant, community spaces in this neighborhood?
    a. Are any of those spaces focused on young children and families?
      i. If so, what are some programs/events/spaces they offer young children and families?
12. Do you think Brilliant Detroit is an important community space?
    a. For whom? If so, please give an example of why this space is important.
13. How would you describe the Brilliant Detroit community (in this neighborhood)?
    a. Do you consider anyone from outside of the neighborhood as part of this community? If so, who? If not, why not?
14. Each neighborhood site has its own unique "personality", according to the CEO.
    a. In your own words, describe the "personality" of your site.
    b. What do you think are the factors that contribute to this "personality"?

      i. Do you think the history of the neighborhood itself contributes to this "personality"?
          1. If yes, in what ways?
          2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?
      ii. Do you think race, ethnicity, and culture contribute to the "personality" of the site?
          1. If yes, in what ways?
          2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?
      iii. Do you think race, ethnicity, and culture contribute to the "personality" of the site?
          1. If yes, in what ways?
          2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?
      iv. Do you think religion contributes to the "personality" of the site?
          1. If yes, in what ways?
          2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?
      v. Do you think socioeconomic status contributes to the "personality" of the site?
          1. If yes, in what ways?
          2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?
      vi. Do you think neighbors and others who make up the broader neighborhood community contribute to the "personality" of the site?

15. In your own words, please describe the staff of Brilliant Detroit.
    a. Do you think staff are aligned with the stated mission and goals of the nonprofit?
      i. Do your experiences support that the organization is committed to working "with, for, and by" the community?
          1. If so, please share an example of how you have experienced this.
          2. If not, please share an experience that demonstrates this is missing from your experience.
      ii. Do your experiences support that the organization is committed to building neighborhoods where families with kids 0-8 have everything they need to be:
          1. school-ready?
          2. healthy?
          3. stable?
             a. If so, please share an example of how you have experienced this.
             b. If not, please share an experience that demonstrates this is missing from your experience.
      iii. Do your experiences support that Brilliant Detroit provides opportunities for:
          1. love?
          2. safety?
          3. growth?
             a. If so, please share an example of how you have experienced this.

        b. If not, please share an experience that demonstrates this is missing from your experience.

16. How is power distributed (or not) between community participants and staff/leadership?
    a. Are you part of the advisory board at your site?
        i. If yes, please describe your role experiences as part of the board.
        ii. If not, please describe your understanding of the board and how it works. Have you ever been invited to participate with the advisory board?
            a. Can you give an example of staff demonstrating care on the job? Humility? Trust? Openness?

17. Can you give an example of staff demonstrating care on the job? Humility? Trust? Openness?

18. Can you give an example of a time when there were conflicts/challenges between staff and community participants?
    a. Was this resolved?

        i. If yes, please explain how it was resolved?

        ii. If no, please explain. ?

19. In your experience, are partner organizations delivering services such as leading classes or workshops aligned with the stated mission and goals of the organization? (with, for, and by community; provide love, safety, space for growth;

20. <u>Family Literacy</u>

21. In your own words, what is literacy or family literacy?
    a. How does (family) literacy fit into your view of "kid success" (if at all)? Is this different or similar to how you see literacy as part of the organization's mission?

22.

23. Have you participated in literacy programs at your neighborhood site? Which ones?
    a. Do you think these programs are customized for your neighborhood?
        i. If so, how?
        ii. If not, do you think there are ways they should be more customized?

24. Can you give an example of a time when you/your child participated in a literacy program(s) for children, parents, or families and they have been:
    a. Successful?
        i. In your opinion, what made this a successful program?
    b. Unsuccessful?
        i. In your opinion, what made this an unsuccessful program?

25. Can you give an example of a time that the staff at Brilliant Detroit has demonstrated that they wanted your feedback or opinions?

26. Can you give an example of a time when your feedback or another community member's feedback influenced a decision or helped the Brilliant Detroit staff make decisions?

27. Do you have an example of time when you wish BD staff had communicated or engaged with families differently?
28. Has your involvement at Brilliant Detroit changed how you interact with your neighborhood community?
    a. If yes, how?
29. Do you spend time in any other early childhood related spaces?
    i. If yes, what are those spaces?
    ii. How do your experiences with other community members and staff in those spaces compare to your experiences at Brilliant Detroit?
    iii. What is the same/different about those experiences?
    iv. In your opinion, is there anything these organizations could learn from each other?

30. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B

Staff and Leader Interview Protocol

NOTE: The following questions are a list of questions that may be asked over 1-2 interview sessions. Given that the interviews will be semi-structured, that I will be collecting data from other sources, and that participants may have limited availability, I will not be asking each participant all listed questions.

Guiding Research Questions

1. **What is "kid success" according to community members, staff, and leadership, and how does (family) literacy fit into this mission?**
2. **How does each neighborhood hub enact the mission of the organization?**
a.   **How do (family) literacy practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?**
1.   **What organizational culture and structures are in place to support the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of "kid success" and (family) literacy?**

General Questions

1. How and when did you become involved with Brilliant Detroit?
    a. Please describe the role and responsibilities of your position.
        i. If this has changed over time, please explain.

2. Brilliant Detroit's mission is to build "kid success" neighborhoods. In your own words, describe what the term "kid success" means to you.
    a. How do you, as a staff member, support (your version) of a "kid success" mission in this neighborhood? (If their version is different) Review BD's mission and then ask: From your perspective, do you think there are ways BD could, or should, expand their version of "kid success"?
        i. In your opinion, is a focus on early education, family support, and health appropriate? Is there anything you would take away or add to that focus?
3.
    a. How do you, in your role, support the "kid success" mission?
    b. (possible follow-up) How do families fit into your definition of "kid success" OR How is "kid success" related to family, neighborhood, and community success?
4.

5. Do you live in the neighborhood where you currently work? Another Detroit neighborhood?
6. for follow up
    a. For instance, do you identify as a Detroiter? If so, how does that identity inform your work at the site?
    b. How does your race, ethnicity, and culture inform your work at this site?
    c. How does (do) the language(s) you speak inform your work at this site?
    d. Are there any other identities that inform your work at this site? (ex: religion, occupation, role of immigration in your life, family role such as parent/grandparent/aunt/uncle)
7. OR
    a. If you are not from Detroit: Where are you from? How did you begin your work in the city? How do you think that perspective informs/influences how you approach your work in the city?
8. For instance, do you identify as a Detroiter (even if you live outside of the city)? If so, how does that identity inform your participation at the site?
9. How does your race, ethnicity, and culture inform your participation at this site?
10. How does (do) the language(s) you speak inform your participation at this site?
11. Are there any other identities that inform your participation at this site? (ex: religion, occupation, role of immigration in your life, family role such as parent/grandparent/aunt/uncle)
12.

13. (If site-specific) How do you describe the _____ (SW/Brightmoor/Fitzgerald) neighborhood?
    a. What are some important, or significant, community spaces in this neighborhood? Do you think Brilliant Detroit is an important community space? For whom?
        i. Are any of those spaces focused on young children and families?
            1. If so, what are some programs/events/spaces they offer young children and families?
14.

15. How would you describe the Brilliant Detroit community (in this neighborhood or in general)?
    a. Do you consider anyone from outside of the neighborhood as part of this community? If so, who? If not, why not?
    b. How do people become part of the Brilliant Detroit community?
        i. How do partner organizations get invited/involved in the Brilliant Detroit community?
        ii. How do volunteer groups get invited/involved in the Brilliant Detroit community?
        iii. How do funders get invited/involved in the Brilliant Detroit community?
        iv. Are there any other stakeholders beyond community members, staff, leadership, partner organizations, volunteers, funders? If so, how do those stakeholders get invited/involved in the Brilliant Detroit community?

   v. In your opinion, do stakeholders have a shared understanding of the role and mission of the organization? **How do you approach collaboration with partners?**

     1. Do you have any examples of times when stakeholders were well-aligned in their values, mission, and goals?

      a. Did this involve stakeholders from different parts of the organization? (Example: community members and funders or a facilitator from a partner organization and participants in a program)

     2. Do you have any examples of times when stakeholders were not well-aligned in their values, mission, and goals?

      a. Did this involve stakeholders from different parts of the organization? (Example: community members and funders or a facilitator from a partner organization and participants in a program)

16. I have heard staff members refer to each neighborhood site saying it has its own unique "personality"

  a. In your own words, describe the "personality" of your site/the org.

  b. What do you think are the factors that contribute to this "personality"?

    i. Do you think the history of the neighborhood/the city itself contributes to this "personality"?

     1. If yes, in what ways?

     2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?

    ii. Do you think race, ethnicity, and culture contribute to the "personality" of the site?

     1. If yes, in what ways?

     2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?

    iii. Do you think race, ethnicity, and culture contribute to the "personality" of the site?

     1. If yes, in what ways?

     2. If not, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?

    iv. Do you think religion contributes to the "personality" of the site?

     1. If yes, in what ways?

     2. If no, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?

    v. Do you think resources contribute to the "personality" of the site?

     1. If yes, in what ways?

     2. If no, why do you think that doesn't affect the site?

    vi. Do you think the structure of the organization contributes to the personality of the site?

17. In your own words, please describe the workplace culture at Brilliant Detroit.

18. Do your experiences support that the organization is committed to working "with, for, and by" the community?

  a. Do your experiences support that the organization is committed to building neighborhoods where families with kids 0-8 have everything they need to be:

    i. school-ready?

    ii. healthy?

          iii. stable?
- b. Do your experiences support that Brilliant Detroit provides opportunities for:
    - i. love?
    - ii. safety?
    - iii. growth?
        1. If so, please share an example.
        2. If no, please share an experience that demonstrates this is missing from your experience.
- c. Do you feel that all staff (and other stakeholder) voices are equally valued?
    - i. If so, describe how the organization is structured to create this dynamic.
    - ii. If not, describe how the organization is structured so that this is not possible.
- d. Describe how power is distributed between the global level and the neighborhood staff?
    - i.
    - ii. Can you give an example of a time when there were conflicts/challenges between co-workers? Or between staff and leadership or executive board members?
        1. How was this resolved (or not)?
    - iii. This is a multiracial, multicultural, multilingual organization. Neighborhood staff reflects the neighborhood they work in, but with many different neighborhoods represented and many non-local staff members at the global level, it seems there would be a lot of navigation of different identities (like those discussed in previous questions)
        1. Can you give an example of a time when shared identities proved valuable in this work?
        2. Can you give an example of a time when shared identities lead to challenges or tension in this work?
        3. Can you give an example of a time when different identities proved valuable in this work?
        4.
        5. Can you give an example of a time when different identities lead to challenges or tension in this work?
        6. Is there specific training for working with diverse colleagues?
            - a. If so, what are some examples of this training?
            - b. Are there any training on race, ethnicity, and culture? (repeat question with language? immigration? religion? whiteness? cultural sensitivity? Detroit history?)
                - i. If so, who does the training?
                    1. What are your experiences with these training sessions?
                        - a. What is your opinion on the presence or absence of these training programs?
                    2. Are these training sessions optional? Are they for all staff or just neighborhood/global

staff? What about leadership/funders/partner organizations?

      a. What is your opinion about including all stakeholders in such training sessions?

<u>Family and community engagement</u>

19. What strategies does the organization use to engage families in neighborhoods?
    a. Have those strategies changed at all over time?
    b. Do you apply those strategies differently when you are first entering a neighborhood vs neighborhood site that are more established?

20. Can you give any examples of how engagement strategies have supported the mission of "kid success" neighborhoods? How have they supported family literacy programs?
21. (If not mentioned above) Does the organization seek out input from (what are the structures in place for stakeholders to give their opinions, share their resources and knowledge, etc.):
    a. community participants?
        i. If yes, how and when?
            1. Can you give an example of a time you learned something from a participant that changed how you do your job?
        ii. If not, why not?
    b. staff members
        i. If yes, how and when?
            1. (if applicable) Can you give an example of a time you learned something from a staff member that changed how you do your job?
        ii. If not, why not?
    c. global staff
        i. If yes, how and when?
            1. (if applicable) Can you give an example of a time you learned something from a global staff member that changed how you do your job?
        ii. If no, why not?
    d. partner organizations and/or volunteers
        i. If yes, how and when?
            1. (if applicable) Can you give an example of a time you learned something from a partner organization or volunteer that changed how you do your job?
        ii. If no, why not?
    e. funders/board members/co-founders
        i. If yes, how and when?
            1. (if applicable) Can you give an example of a time you learned something from a funder/board member/co-founder that changed how you do your job?
        ii. If no, why not?

<u>Family Literacy</u>

22. How does (family) literacy fit into your view of "kid success" (if at all)? Is this different or similar to how you see literacy as part of the organization's mission?
23. What are some examples of literacy programs offered through the organization (or at your site).
    a. Are these programs customized for each neighborhood?
        i. If so, how?
        ii. If not, why not?
24. Can you give an example of a time when a literacy program for children, parents, or families have been? How do you know? (What kind of data is collected for each program?)
    a. Successful?
        i. Why?
        ii. How do you know? (data?)
25. Unsuccessful?
        i. Why?
        ii. How do you know? (data?)
26. What are some specific ways the programming at this site/organization reflects a focus on literacy?
    a. How are **staff** involved in choosing and/or developing literacy-related programs or interventions that are incorporated at this site?
        i. What is the criteria for determining which literacy-related programs to include?
        ii. Is there an example of something that was not chosen or abandoned? Why was it not chosen or ended?
    b. Are **families** involved in choosing and/or developing literacy-related programs or interventions that are incorporated at this site?
        i. How are families invited to participate in this level of decision-making?
        ii. If they are not, why not?
        iii. Are there any examples of drawing from cultural or linguistic traditions/ resources of families and communities when choosing programs? (for example- a program developed for Latinx families specifically vs. choosing one program and applying it to all sites/just changing the language of instruction to Spanish)
27. Are there any examples of partner organizations or volunteers whose values or mission do not align with those of Brilliant Detroit?
    a. If so, how did you know?
        i. What structures are in place to determine if a partner organization is in alignment with Brilliant Detroit?
        ii. Is there a structure in place to ask families how they feel about partner organizations and volunteers?
        iii. After realizing this misalignment, how did you proceed?
    b. If not, how do you know?
        i. What structure is in place to determine if a partner organization is in alignment with Brilliant Detroit?

12. In light of what you shared do you have any (additional) thoughts about how the specific cultural and linguistic characteristics of Latinx, African American, or other participating families matter when it comes to
    Early literacy programming goals and needs?
    Effective family engagement strategies?

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix C

Observation Protocols

Guiding Research Questions

1. What is "kid success" according to community members, staff, and leadership, and how does (family) literacy fit into this mission?
2. How does each neighborhood hub enact the mission of the organization?

a.   How do (family) literacy practices and programs vary, or not, based on the neighborhood?

1.   What organizational culture and structures are in place to support the neighborhood hubs in their pursuit of "kid success" and (family) literacy?

To do:
- Gather general impressions of virtual settings
- Write down basic descriptive facts
    - Note participants/roles
    - Physical or virtual setup
- Focus on main dialogue and activities
- Note language choices- by whom and when
- Get artifacts!
- If this is a staff meeting- who is "running" the meeting
- If this is a literacy program with family participants- who is "running" the program

To focus on:
- **Observations of staff meetings**
    - Who is talking in the meeting?
        - Note: length of turns, turn-taking, who initiates the topic, language(s) used
    - Is there an observed structure to the meeting? (ex: meeting agenda; meeting norms)
        - If there appears to be a structure but it's unclear through observation- write questions for follow-up.
    - If there is an observed structure, is this structure adhered to/referenced?
        - If so, are there roles to maintain the structure (note-taker, timekeeper?)
            - If so, who is in those roles?
    - Is there evidence of relationship-building or maintaining? If so, what does that look like?
    - Does everyone at the meeting have the opportunity to talk? Do they?

- o Is anyone representing the voice of community participants?
  - ▪ If so, how? Ex: offering feedback from families/community participants?
  - ▪ If not, is there any reference to families?
- o Are other stakeholders (funders, co-founders, partner org, volunteers) represented?
  - ▪ If so, are they included in the meeting or are represented in other ways?
  - ▪ How much time/attention is spent on each stakeholder group?
- o Are neighborhood-specific issues discussed?
- o Are specific issues of race, ethnicity, culture discussed? (same for any other demographic indicators such as immigration status, SES, language, religion, etc.)
  - ▪ If so, by whom?
  - ▪ How do others respond? How is the issue taken up?
- **Observations of programs**
  - o What is the focus of the program or meeting?
    - ▪ Are there any indications that this program or meeting was designed/modified for this particular site?
    - ▪ Who is leading the program?
      - ▪ Is this person a Brilliant Detroit staff, community member, or volunteer?
      - ▪ Is this person a representative from a partner organization?
    - ▪ Examples of asset-based language or deficit-based language
      - ▪ Who is speaking?
      - ▪ Is this language part of a curriculum connected with a program?
      - ▪ Who is talking in the meeting?
        - ▪ Note: length of turns, turn-taking, who initiates the topic, language(s) used
  - o Is there an observed structure to this program? (Program agenda or group norms)
  - o Is there evidence of relationship-building or maintaining? If so, what does that look like?
  - o Does everyone at the meeting have the opportunity to talk? Do they?
  - o Are community members able to share or engage with their own experiences/history/knowledge/practices?
    - ▪ If so, who initiates this?
  - o Are children present?
    - ▪ If so, how are they involved in the program or meeting?
      - ▪ How are they talked to? Talked about?
- (Family literacy programs) How are home language and literacy practices incorporated, if at all? Are they discussed? Are they affirmed? Are they discounted?

General questions across spaces
- How do community members or staff members seem to be positioned in this space?
  - o Are they considered knowledgeable?
  - o Is the interaction unidirectional or bidirectional?
- Do community members or staff members participating in the activity seem comfortable in the space?

- Are community members or staff invited to share/engage their expertise about their own children, their lives, their experiences, their shared histories (neighborhood-based experiences)?
- If community members are not present: how are families represented (if at all)? Are families spoken about with a strengths-based orientation? Is there deficit language around families' skills, knowledge, and practices? (Same for staff members who are not present)

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