

Lessons Learned from Community-Based Child Language Research

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Summary

Community-Based Research (CBR) is a collaborative and participatory approach to research in which the researchers partner with the community to produce knowledge that solves real world problems (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). CBR has gained attention in the public health and nursing fields for the last decade and has even found its place in the 2012-2016 NIH NIDCD Strategic Plan. Specifically, Priority Area 4 “Improving Outcomes for Human Communication” has a CBR goal with two areas of focus:

1. Promote community-based research and data collection to identify factors that influence outcomes for people with voice, speech, or language impairments, and to inform the development of public policy recommendations.
2. Examine community-level health promotion strategies to prevent the occurrence of, reduce the risk of, or improve the adherence with treatment of voice, speech, and language impairments. (Taken from 2012-2016 NIDCD Strategic Plan)

CBR should be considered as following along a continuum. At one end of the continuum is research conducted that is in the public’s interest. At the other end of the continuum is community-based participatory action research, which is considered to be the highest level of CBR. Levels between these endpoints from least to most CBR include: community-focused research, community-based research, and community-based participatory research.

In contrast to more traditional investigator-driven research, high levels of CBR is a collaborative and participatory approach to research in which the community partners with researchers to produce knowledge that solves real world problems. CBR seeks community engagement at each phase of the research project rather than merely community-placed research. Drawing on over a decade of experience, Barbara Israel and her colleagues (1998, 2005, 2008) have identified eight key principles of CBPR that support successful research partnerships:

- Recognizes community as a unit of identity
- Builds on strengths and resources within the community
- Facilitates collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research
- Integrates knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners
- Promotes a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities
- Involves a cyclical and iterative process
- Addresses health from both positive and ecological perspectives
- Disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners

Using a CBR approach has been shown to improve outcomes within diverse groups when addressing complex health and social problems making it a natural fit for communication sciences researchers.

The goal of the proposed session is to define CBR and its levels in the context of child language research. We aim to spark a discussion among researchers and clinicians on how to improve health outcomes for children with language weaknesses using a CBR approach. To that end, we will provide a brief overview of CBR. Then, the two presenters will profile their own projects, highlighting the research methodology as it relates to CBR, levels of community engagement, benefits to varying stakeholders, and lessons learned.

Project Summaries

CBR can be viewed on a continuum with research in the public interest at one end and community-based participatory action research at the other. We present two projects that vary in their levels of community engagement.

Integrative Preschool and the City Heights Partnership for Children (Pruitt-Lord)

This project was established as part of a larger CBR endeavor (The City Heights Educational Collaborative). The non-profit funder is committed to improving educational and health outcomes for children in a specific community. Through discussions with parents and educators, the funder identified a need for improved preschool education. Given that the majority of the students were dual language learners and from low-income families, the funders approached the PI to develop a program that identified learning disabilities early, educated parents on the importance of rich language experiences, and provided quality education for the preschoolers. The results as they benefited the preschool students, the teachers, the families, the school community, the CSD graduate students, our research program, and the non-profit funding agency will be discussed.

Grammatical Interventions for Children with Language Impairment (Finestack)

This program of research focuses on the evaluation of an alternative explicit approach to teaching grammatical forms to children with language impairment. Although the first documented evidence of this research program (Finestack & Fey, 2009) represents CBR that is very much “to” and “for” the community and in the public’s interest, the PI developed the research questions based on her own experiences as a speech-language pathologist, representing community-based participatory influences. Following person clinical observations, the PI first evaluated the use of an explicit approach to teach grammatical forms in a highly-controlled laboratory setting. The PI is currently completing a subsequent NIH R03-funded study which is being conducted “in” the community at local elementary schools and may be considered community-based research. The next step in this line of research, currently underway, entails research “with” the community that is community-based participatory research. In this study the PI is observing current clinical practices when targeting grammatical forms and soliciting clinician input regarding the feasibility of interventions incorporating explicit approaches. This program of research will be used to provide examples of lower levels of CBR and will be used to illustrate on way to progress to higher CBR stages. Results from each study phase will be presented as they informed the development of subsequent research projects.

In addition to the many benefits of conducting CBR, we will present the lessons we have learned in an effort to encourage other researchers and clinicians to explore these challenges in their own settings. CBR is commonplace in other allied health professions and has the potential to improve the identification, treatment, and prevention of communication disorders.