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ON THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE IN COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Ankhi Thakurta
Chloe Kannan
David Setiawan
Marco Kosasih
María Paula Ghiso
Gerald Campano

Abstract:

Abstract: What is the power of the collective, and how is it practically leveraged in the context of community-based educational research? In this article, members of the STA Community Research Partnership, a literacy focused project that has linked diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic communities with university researchers for nearly a decade, reflect on these questions. The multiple authors draw upon their identities, experiences, and perspectives as doctoral students, literacy professors, and community based leaders to mine the complexities of participating in an intergenerational collaborative dedicated to the exploration of issues related to educational equity and access. Anchored by critical literacy perspectives and democratic approaches to knowledge production, they ultimately argue that it is within the tensions and foreclosures of holding space for a plurality of perspectives that it is possible to locate the richest advantages—and, indeed, the power— of the collective in educational research and praxis.

Keywords: Community, Research, Literacy, Equity, Partnership

Introduction

In their broader call for more equitable research methodologies and practices in the field of literacy in an introduction to the November 2018 edition of *Research in the Teaching of English,* editors Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Amy Stornaiuolo, and Gerald Campano (2018) foreground "the power of the collective" (p. 98). Positioning their remarks in relation to historical collaborations like the Cohambee River Collective, Black feminist thinkers who "felt left behind by the imperatives of the Civil Rights and women's movements" and worked together in the pursuit of social justice (p. 97), the authors are aligned with other scholars in education (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Knight et al., 2004; Mirra et al., 2015) who emphasize the ethical imperative, epistemic advantages, and transformative potential of mobilizing previously marginalized voices in both inquiry and praxis. But through what negotiations— whether they be empirical, interpersonal, pedagogical, ethical, or otherwise—is the power of the collective *practically* leveraged in the context of literacy and educational research partnerships? How is that which we call collective power situated and shaped by the group dynamics from which it emerges? What tensions arise in the formation and maintenance of plurivocal inquiry communities that, while committed to coalitional action, remain comprised of diverse stakeholders? And finally, what opportunities does the power of the collective afford both researchers and community members alike?

We—a collective of writers ourselves—consider some of these questions in a discussion of our involvement in the St. Thomas Aquinas (STA) Community Research Partnership, a project that has linked diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic communities in South Philadelphia with literacy researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia Teachers' College for over a decade. Established by Dr. Campano, Dr. María Paula Ghiso, and leaders from the STA community, this literacy-focused initiative represents an ongoing attempt to disrupt the long-standing asymmetries that have historically shaped the educational research process (Campano et al., 2016). Writing from intersectional vantage points (Crenshaw, 1991) as doctoral students and community partners, our commentary surfaces our views on the complexities inherent in leveraging the power of the collective in our research on issues of educational equity and access. In part 1, Ankhi (a doctoral student) discusses how the detours arising in community-based research productively challenge her training as a former teacher and future researcher; in Part 2, Marco (a youth community researcher and freshman at Temple University) observes how pluralistic research communities often feature conflict and disagreements, but also create the conditions for deep and sustained relationships between members. In Part 3, David (a youth community researcher and freshman at the University of

Pennsylvania) reflects on both the challenge of creating a nurturing space for individuals with diverse identities and priorities and the powerful ways in which collective research foregrounds marginalized perspectives. Finally, Chloe (a doctoral candidate) discusses the importance of reciprocity in our work. While our narratives underscore the difficulties of embracing plural views and voices, we ultimately argue that it is *within* the tensions and foreclosures of holding space for diverse perspectives that we locate the richest advantages—and, indeed, the power— of collective inquiry in literacy and education research.

Part 1: Reframing detours in community-based research

Ankhi Thakurta is a doctoral student and Research Assistant for the STA Community Research Partnership

On a Saturday in the Fall of 2019, the children, parents, grandparents, graduate students, and university professors comprising the STA Community Research Partnership convened in the Silverstein Forum, a spacious room at the University of Pennsylvania, to initiate the ninth year of the collaboration. I, a doctoral student and recent addition to Dr. Campano and Dr. Ghiso's team, was among them. As a former English Language Arts teacher from New York and neophyte to the field of community-based research, I was eager to nurture the emergent bonds I was forming with various individuals involved in the partnership and to understand, in greater depth, the dynamics of this approach to knowledge production. On that particular day, I also had a specific job—to lead a small group discussion about a list of priorities that was generated during the 2015–2016 year by community members. Numbering twelve goals in total, it included the importance of providing culturally responsive teaching in all public schools, smaller class sizes, translational services for speakers of different languages, as well as the urgency of addressing racism and the placement of students on differing academic paths through tracking practices. These emerged from the specific issues that individuals faced in their attempts to navigate city schools as linguistic, racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities. Since one of our guiding ambitions for the 2019–2020 year was to design professional development for city teachers that was rooted in the concerns of our community partners, we decided as a research team to winnow down the list of twelve into three priorities that would underpin our subsequent planning and discussions in the upcoming year. We thought that this could be accomplished through the most democratic means possible: a sustained dialogue with community members during our first meeting of the year.

And so, once we reconvened after the long summer months on that sunny afternoon in September, the members of the partnership dispersed into small groups. Those groups, led by graduate students and community leaders, were intended to promote discussions around which of the three priorities we could emphasize as a larger community. Afterwards, the plan was to vote as a bigger group on the priorities that were generated in the smaller conversations. With such objectives in mind, I accompanied a small band of Indonesian parents out of Silverstein Forum and into a nearby courtyard. Notebook and pencil in hand, I prepared to guide my group towards an assessment of the three priorities that we could highlight to the rest of the community. But as we sat together, a few of our parent participants began to share stories about the difficulties that they faced trying to provide academic resources for their children, to communicate with teachers, and to understand the demands of an educational system that felt both inaccessible and byzantine. As the minutes wore on, I, as a facilitator, faced a few options: to reorient our conversation back to the list of priorities, or to step back and provide space for parental testimonies. I opted for the latter, aware that we would return to the Silverstein Forum without our top three group-determined choices. As emotion clouded the voices of the mothers and fathers in our circle, emphasizing the ways in which this gathering provided a supportive and cathartic space in which to voice their concerns, I knew that it was the ethical and contextually appropriate choice to make.

I offer this vignette, which highlights both challenges and affordances of leveraging the power of the collective, from my vantage point as a former teacher and current graduate student at Penn. Much of my pedagogical and scholarly training has been oriented around *individual* achievement and production; thus, my engagement with this work is inevitably colored by the biases I have developed from my previous professional experiences. As an English Language Arts teacher in East Harlem, for example, I was routinely rated against stringent rubrics that laid less emphasis on communal dimensions of learning, and more on my supposed competency as the "leader" of my classroom. As a current doctoral student, I routinely perceive competition amongst graduate students and professors alike, who strive to outperform their peers in their bids to survive the unyielding pressures of the Academy. By my measure, the work of supporting a democratic partnership is not detached from such experiences; rather, it poses a deep and persistent challenge to them. In my experience as a member of the STA Community Research Partnership—a role that entails, among other responsibilities, facilitating community meetings, supporting youth researchers in their exploration of issues in education during Saturday meetings, working with community members to present at academic conferences run by organizations like NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) and AERA (American Educational Research Association), and co-writing pieces such as this one—carefully crafted agendas and projected timelines to meet academic deadlines often fall by the wayside. Group goals are subject to persistent renegotiation, and responsive to the needs of multiple, rather than individual, stakeholders. Finally, the ongoing labor of creating genuine space for a multitude of perspectives is time-intensive and often circuitous; in some moments, it does not feel immediately rewarding in the ways that those of us trained to understand "success," "productivity," or "accomplishment" in hegemonic terms have been taught to identify.

Notably, however, I have found that the power of collective research actually emanates from those very complexities and supposed disruptions. In my experience on the partnership, the coalitional quality of our approach leads to a democratization of knowledge production and participation in ways largely unattainable through dominant research paradigms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ghiso et. al., 2019). The process of centering plural voices—which entails, correspondingly, a decentering of the self—leads to the formation of deeper and more intentional bonds between researchers and community members. This is in and of itself a powerful subversion of the traditional dynamic binding the "researcher" to the "researched." Further, the belief that cultivating our mutual interdependence is more important than elevating certain individuals over others has itself been a powerful realization for me. When I receive messages from parents and youth partners who ask me how I am doing or seek support for applications to high school or college, I am moved by how I have been brought into the fold of the extraordinary and distinctly communal fabric of the STA Community Research Partnership.

There are, undeniably, moments of frustration. These tend to emerge when a conference or publication deadline looms ahead, or when a youth or intergenerational session does not achieve the benchmarks it supposedly "should." But as I reflect on the traditions that have shaped me as a researcher and individual, I increasingly strive to frame these detours as opportunities. It is in the work of following organic leads—whether they be the impassioned testimonies of parents who have felt persistently unheard by the school system, or the inquiries generated by youth researchers which, because of their thoughtfulness and depth, elongate group discussions—that the richest and most nuanced perspectives on issues of equity and access in public schools are surfaced. It is in those pathbreaks that the potential of the collective is more fully realized, as subaltern moments come into play improvisationally. And for those of us in the field of research both committed to social justice and also connected to the oppressive legacies of individualism, community exploitation, and self-aggrandizement on which the Academy is built, there remains much still to learn and unlearn.

Part 2: The struggles and rewards of building a research community

Marco Kosasih is a Penn Fellow, a youth community researcher, and freshman at Temple University

In 2010, Dr. Campano and Dr. Ghiso wanted to learn more about immigrant rights issues in the city of Philadelphia. One of the events that they attended was hosted by New Sanctuary Movement, an interfaith organization, inside the Catholic parish of STA (Campano et al., 2016). They began conversations with the speaker and the Indonesian priest and made plans to form a partnership. That became the basis of almost a decade of collaborative research.

During the first year, the university team mostly worked alongside community members on events that were occurring within the parish. As their trust began to grow on both sides, Dr. Campano and Dr. Ghiso began mapping out activities that the parishioners could benefit from within the partnership that also allowed them to reach their goal as scholars: to conduct research alongside the community. This was where Penn Pals came in. It was a small program that allowed participants from the South Philadelphia community to not only improve their English by exchanging letters with graduate students, but also to build trust with the Penn community. Beside Penn Pals, the team was also involved with various events that the parish conducted including "a comic club for elementary students (conducted in years 2–4 of the partnership), a language and literacy class for Latinx families and young children (conducted in years 2–4), a research group with Indonesian and Latinx adolescents (conducted in year 4), and action research investigating community literacies and advocacy (conducted in years 3–5)" (Campano et al., 2016, p. 32).

Over time, parents from the STA community began to utilize the support coming from Penn as a way to express their concerns about the Philadelphia education system, especially since they were not native to the United States. Joining the partnership allowed their voices to be heard by teachers, principals, and the nation's education system so that their children could have better lives than they did. This was when I (Marco) joined the group. Coming to America at the start of my seventh year in school, I was not great at English nor at making friends. My mother constantly searched for free programs that would not only teach me this alien language, but also help me form new connections that I could utilize in the future. Among such programs was the STA Community Research Partnership. At first, my church friends and I attended partnership events to discuss literary pieces, whether they be poems or articles on issues like racial discrimination in the United States. As I joined these meetings, I noticed that the conversations shifted to our schools and how we could improve them. Our youth group gathered information through different means and presented at conferences in our region such as AERA and NCTEAR (National Council of Teachers of English Assembly for Research) during my high school years. Beside working with the students, the university team would also conduct meetings with our parents and the leaders of the parish to discuss the same issues that we presented on.

I have experienced many aspects of the STA Community Research Partnership and understand the struggles that go into maintaining a collaboration such as this one. For example, a challenge I noticed was that as relationships grew and deepened, there were also emergent conflicts about the ideal direction that the partnership should go. This was because as people felt closer to each other and freer to express their views, there were also more clashes in perspectives. People reached points of disagreement, and some would not get what they wanted. It was particularly tough to control the abundance of ideas, especially

in a large group.

But as a facilitator and community member, I have observed great benefits as well. It might seem challenging, for example, for my small voice to be heard by anyone. It is because of this group that we youth community participants can express our opinions in various ways: in small group discussions, in conversation with one another, and through discussions with partnership leaders such as the elders from our communities in South Philadelphia. Through these interactions and opportunities, we receive support in the form of encouragement, suggestions and feedback, and feel the power of our voices growing. This helps us work towards creating a more equitable future for those younger than us, who can benefit from our research and suggestions for transforming the educational system. Moreover, as more people have joined the group, it has increased the likelihood that our voices will be heard by others and lead to demands for educational equity being enacted. Being part of the facilitator team now, I also see how the youth members benefit from this experience: in my observation, they grow to love their assigned topics and willingly invest their time to share their experiences in conferences.

With the connections that I made from the partnership, I have also improved. This partnership has greatly impacted my life in terms of adapting to this new land, redefining what research is to me, and showing me the power of presenting ideas. Despite being a very silent kid because of my experience being bullied, the STA Community Research Partnership has allowed me to express my feelings and eventually let my opinions be heard by key stakeholders and authorities in charge of the educational system. I never thought I could form such close personal and professional bonds with other people, and it was in part possible because of the partnership.

Part 3: Lessons from the evolution of the community-based partnership

David Setiawan is a Penn Fellow, youth community researcher, and freshman at the University of Pennsylvania

Initially, I (David) had participated in the Youth Researchers group as a community member. As I transitioned into college, however, my role reversed and I became one of the researchers. Being in the two roles gave me the chance to see the group from two different perspectives. Over the years, I've seen the group do many different kinds of projects. Although varied, these projects all have some focus on research, which I find to be important for the youth participants today as such skills will help them in their schoolwork and any future research project they may pursue. Throughout my involvement in the partnership, I was fortunate to observe and learn about the process and complexities of collective research firsthand.

An important concept that became very apparent over time in the group was that collective research will satisfy most people, but not everyone all the time. This idea grew clear when the parents of students in the community began to participate in group meetings towards the beginning of the partnership. Prior to the parents' involvement, the group focused broadly on discussions around issues related to urban inequality and the research processes in general—that is, on how to identify individually relevant inquiries, collect data, engage in analysis, and so on. When parents began to join, there were some shifts: Though many youth group members still wanted to engage in the sorts of independent research projects they had been doing, parents wanted to take action on the issue of educational access. They identified this as an issue that affected the entire group. But even though most members were content with the change in the group's focus as it was a collective decision, some youth were initially skeptical because it limited the social topics they could research in the group. I remember, for example, observing some informal discussions between youth members that suggested their uncertainty about the new focus on education. Although they eventually embraced this change, this transitional moment in our group history illustrates an aspect of collective work that we have to accept: that we cannot completely satisfy everybody all the time.

Further, there are other challenges that I began to notice more recently. In 2019, for example, I graduated high school and started attending the University of Pennsylvania. With this new change in my life came an adjustment in my role in the research group: I became one of the university-based researchers. This switch has been an interesting experience for me so far, but I was not alone in the transition. Two other group members underwent the same change. The three of us formed what is known on the partnership as the Penn Fellows. In our new positions, we are learning more about the group from an ethnographic perspective and developing a whole new set of skills: how to effectively read academic texts, how to facilitate and teach student inquiry groups, how to make lesson plans, and more. At first, we struggled with facilitating groups and with some of the other things that were required of us in these new roles. Notably, for example, trying to get everyone to contribute something to group discussions during our community meetings was particularly difficult. I especially faced this challenge when we supported conversations with very young middle school kids. Some did not have anything they felt was relevant to say, and others may not have been able to personally connect to the conversation. Whatever the case, we as Fellows had to find different ways to engage them as important members of our research community. This, I believe, is an inevitable challenge in the collective research process.

By having group meetings and the chance to facilitate a group almost every week, we Penn Fellows gradually developed our

skills through key experiences. The first project with my new role, for example, was one relating back to the research priorities of the community, which were elaborated upon in Part 1. I found that the process of deciding on three areas to focus on within a larger set of identified priorities for educational change was not an easy one because the list of initially generated goals were all important to the community. The process took some time because we wanted to make sure that we were honoring the needs and desires of the community as a whole, and we tried to use our new knowledge of facilitation to support community members as they shared their individual perspectives on which three priorities to highlight during small and whole group discussions. This is, again, one of the attendant challenges of the collective research process.

But despite these complexities, there are many serious and undeniable advantages to collective work. For example, this form of research allows for a larger collection of ideas, perspectives, and experiences to be brought into the inquiry process. For as long as I can remember, the group has really pushed the idea that all people have the ability to make a change, regardless of factors like age, race, religion, and language; this has allowed me to see that the research group recognizes the importance of everyone's involvement. During the 2017–2018 academic year, after the creation of the initial list of priorities that was discussed in Part 1, the Youth Researchers group wanted to do a project that related to educational access on a more reachable level. As a whole, the group decided to delve into issues in public schools since most of the students attended such institutions. The project was split into four groups, with each group having a specific focus. My group concentrated on the physical conditions of schools since we, as students, believed they were important to address. I specifically spoke about security issues and lunch problems because both topics impacted me greatly in high school—our school had received a bomb threat from a student, lacked after-school security, and had very tiny lunch portions with subpar food quality. Reflecting back, I realize that an important feature of this project was the role of personal experiences. The group valued testimonials, treating them with as much significance as traditional research findings. As students, we felt that because we were the ones being directly affected by issues of educational inequality, we knew which problems had the most impact. Each group was thus able to develop their topics with nuance and depth because each member had different experiences and opinions that they could contribute.

The research findings from those investigations were eventually presented at two conferences: the NCTEAR conference and the AERA conference. These conferences were the group's first major presentations. Never in a million years would we—high schoolers, middle schoolers, and mothers and fathers (most of whom were immigrants)—think we would be given a chance to let our voices be heard by people that can help us take action on these issues. Each group's collection of research and experiences allowed each topic to be described from multiple angles, eliminating the problem of delivering to the audience a plain description. Participating in the conference showed me how strong and impactful research could become when different perspectives and ideas came together, and that everyone's experience is valid, valuable, and powerful.

Based on my experiences, I believe that this partnership is one in which everyone has an important role—we believe that everybody possesses different forms of knowledge, experience, and expertise that make them invaluable to the processes of collective research and action. In sum, I have found one main important thing from my years of participating in the Youth Researchers group: Though collective research comes with several drawbacks, the positive aspects of such work outweigh the negatives, revealing that the collective is better than the individual in educational research.

Part 4: Cultivating networks of care and reciprocity

Chloe Kannan is a doctoral candidate and Project Director for the STA Community Research Partnership

From the perspective of a graduate student who has worked in various roles on the project over the past three years, I have embraced what community-based research can provide to both our partners and the greater academic community. The long-term nature of our collaboration has helped uncover overarching principles that inform our practices in the short and long term. Ultimately, this approach is grounded in cultivating networks of care and reciprocity.

Over the years, our team constantly reiterates the fact that this type of community research is challenging, especially given that it involves a web of relations, with each person having their own roles, timelines, and agendas that are constantly evolving. This is a tension of collective work that threads through every aspect of the partnership. For example, the families in our research generated what they referred to as demands for educational equity years ago, but other related priorities for school change have risen since then, including the need to understand high school admissions and eventually a more recent issue: navigating the college application process. At times, this did feel stressful given these agendas were unfolding moment by moment and significant headspace was required to figure out how all our goals could both be negotiated and accomplished in a cooperative manner. However, in hindsight, following community members' unfolding inquiries—even if it might have seemed like a redirection—lent itself to something that was transformative and impactful beyond traditional research findings.

Students who had been part of the partnership during the Penn Pals Project, had joined our Youth program, and had grown up with the university research team were now faced with the daunting nature of applying to college. In response, we decided to

focus on an inquiry into college access that would combine a critical and participatory lens with college readiness support. Initially, our team had planned for about five students but the research initiative accelerated overnight due to community interest —we accepted nearly 30 youth and had to turn ten students away because we did not have the capacity or the resources to expand the sessions. I felt guilty and overwhelmed but hoped that we could increase our infrastructure in the future to extend the agendas of community partners to a wider audience. This project became a pilot study which has now evolved into my dissertation research. My scholarly interest in critical literacy melded together with the community priorities of investigating and demystifying college admissions and access. My research question wasn't formed solely in a graduate seminar, but arose out of a sense of relationship and reciprocity. Being attentive to community interests has enabled me to be part of something that might lead to meaningful change.

With community-based research, the families possess a strong institutional memory of past inquiries, and their new interests remained rooted in the overall vision of the collective work: engaging in work around issues of educational equity in order to improve schools. This vision connects all the nested inquiries and projects that have bloomed over the years through an ongoing dialogue about the most pressing issues facing youth and families. The research agenda is iterative and embedded within a larger vision because of the investment of our entire community over time. Over the years, parents had watched both their children and themselves flourish as researchers tackling a range of issues. Yet, in continued conversations, the families frequently returned to the idea and desire of working directly with teachers to bring about change, and foregrounded the need for action around the issues they had identified. Thus, a new outgrowth began to take shape in the form of creating professional development opportunities for schools that were centered on the concerns and perspectives of the families whose children those institutions seek to serve.

These ever-evolving research agendas have been built across racial, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. The negotiation and re-negotiation of ideas, the distilling of varied perspectives into a collective form of action, requires time. In their inquiries, youth and parents need time to discuss the issues, the data they are gathering, the take-aways, and next steps, and this means taking time to understand each other's perspectives and to build relational bonds. There are sometimes visible tensions within group conversations of how to move the work forward, but you can witness the deep love and respect people have for one another when they get up from their seats and hug after group finishes each Saturday afternoon. Time poses a challenge in our work because we are negotiating the expectations of the academy with the lived realities of community members. Time is also what drives the contributions of our partnership, since the rich insights on issues of educational equity and access derive from the ways that individuals across different backgrounds have built relational trust and care over many years.

When you walk into our research site, you can see the benefits of a research partnership based on reciprocity in real-time: the learning and teaching roles shift among the elders, parents, young people, and researchers, expanding conceptions of expertise. The research team, including the Penn Fellows, have had to constantly navigate the logistics of mutuality and reciprocity. This entails, for example, navigating the complex logistics of ensuring that community members can attend an academic conference, facilitating and documenting research inquiries, supporting students with their college essays, and other tasks often invisible in traditional research paradigms. This is all in addition to conventional academic expectations of carrying out and publishing high quality research. In fact, one aspect of academic rigor may involve mobilizing the perspectives of community partners. My experiences have instilled within me many wishes: a wish that there was more representation of minoritized communities at major academic conferences, that cost was not a barrier, and that universities would recognize the value of research agendas that are created in the context of active, community-based initiatives.

I used to approach theory and practice as being worlds apart. In my current capacity as Project Director for our partnership, I have to help create the conditions for a diversity of perspectives to be valued and mobilized. This puts the practice of leadership and research in a much more dialectical relationship. I live and breathe these productive tensions every day, and have found that the process of working and thinking alongside others can be both personally transformative as well as impact the world beyond oneself.

Part 5: Multiple perspectives on leveraging the power of the collective

Leveraging the power of the collective, as we have experienced it, is hardly a seamless endeavor. Though reliant on particular forms of consensus and solidarity, it does not entail the submergence of differences, identities, and perspectives in the service of group goals. Rather, a dynamic, ongoing, and oftentimes fraught *sustainment of heterogeneity* animates our work at every turn. The various authors here have documented the demanding aspects of nurturing this multiplicity in community based research, as well as the rich rewards that they reap as they "...build bridges across groups, form friendships, view those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds as individuals, and dispel negative stereotypes" (Campano et al., 2013, p. 324).

We offer these perspectives with the recognition that community-based research, while challenging and draining, is hopeful, essential, and often path-breaking work. It is also, in the face of enduring and intersecting social inequalities (Collins, 2000), inherently unfinished. We find that there are always new questions to be asked, new alliances to be forged, new challenges to

be faced, and new futures to be imagined. But we embrace the potential that is represented by these various roads, and encourage those committed to the democratization of research in education to do the same.

Ankhi Thakurta is a PhD student in the Reading/Writing/Literacy program in the Literacy, Culture, and International Education division at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. A former eighth grade English Language Arts teacher, her research is at the intersection of migration studies, civic literacy, and community-based education. She if the current Projector Director of the STA Community Research Partnership.

David Setiawan is a first year undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, and community-based researcher on the STA Community Research Partnership.

Marco Kosasih is a first year undergraduate at Temple University and community-based researcher on the STA Community Research Partnership.

Chloe Kannan is an Ed. D. candidate in the Reading/Writing/Literacy program in the Literacy, Culture, and International Education division at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. She if the former Project Director of the STA Community Research Partnership.

Dr. María Paula Ghiso is an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Dr. Gerald Campano is Professor and Chair of the Literacy, Culture, and International Education Division at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.

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