Sharing Space for Equitable Design: Engagement Plan to Intentionally Elevate Historically Excluded Perspectives

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Community engagement is a common early phase of design projects, and a critical juncture for designers to make space for historically marginalized communities to participate in the creative process. The design team for the Longfellow Middle School renovation project implemented a localistic engagement approach that explicitly sought to remove barriers to participation for members of the community and elevate the Longfellow facilities to a more equitable position to its peer schools in the district. The engagement methods of an interdisciplinary team of design and engagement professional included both local leaders and national collaborating experts to create targeted engagement opportunities for Spanish-speaking families and African American families. Our results demonstrate the power of engagement as an opportunity to build shared understanding around a project, to generate engagement data and artifacts that preserve the plurality of many voices, and importance of architects and designers using their project position to make space in the engagement framework for voices that have historically been ignored.

INTRODUCTION

Inequitable resource allocation is a driver of injustice when some schools in a district receive greater shares of funding and resources, while other schools are left with inadequate support for academic programs and learning facilities. In a California school district, shifting enrollment from an enroll-by-choice middle school toward schools already modernized in past projects drove an expanding funding disparity between the peer facilities. The visible gap in funding resulting from these enrollment patterns led to community frustration and mistrust around future projects. In this paper we will describe our localistic approach to project engagement as an opportunity to address issues of trust directly. We will discuss the importance of de-centering the designers to make space in the engagement process to foreground the voices of historically minoritized members of the project community. We will share how the engagement findings afforded opportunities to implement design justice within the project. Finally, we will reflect upon our methods for data analysis and presentation that preserved the plurality of voices that contributed during engagement, and what it might mean to design future engagement strategies that similarly embrace a plurality of voices.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

The Longfellow Middle School project is a community design project focused on renovating the Longfellow facilities to address shortcomings of the building as well as improving its ability to offer an equitable experience compared to the 2 other middle schools serving the area. This project originated in the Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) in Berkeley, California. Longfellow Middle School enrolls about 500 students across grades 6-8, and the student body was 43% Hispanic, 24% Black/African American, and 17% White in 2020.[1] The district also calculates a locally-defined measure called an Academic Support Index that weighs factors like homelessness and non-fluency in English as challenges to succeeding in school, and the district reports most students enrolled at Longfellow face substantial “headwinds” (district terminology).[2]

The Longfellow Middle School is 1 of 3 middle schools in the district, operating alongside Martin Luther King Jr. (King) and Willard Middle Schools. Longfellow is different from the other 2 middle schools in the district because the students who attend come from throughout the district. The school operates as a “choice” for students; the district added Longfellow Middle School in 1995 as part of adding 6th grade to their middle school facilities. Originally intended as an arts and science magnet school, Longfellow is now known for their Two-Way Immersion Program (Spanish) in addition to their STEM programs[3].

Within this context, the Longfellow Middle School renovation project was created to address facilities shortcomings that set Longfellow students and staff at a disadvantage compared to their peers at either King or Willard. The existing facilities in Figure 1 illustrate an outdated vision of school as “institutional,” antithetical to the close-knit community Longfellow placed at the center of the Longfellow identity. In addition to facility updates and repairs, another element of the project was about adding capabilities to the campus that distinguish the school and the programming it can offer. However, the question of WHAT capabilities to add was a question to be answered through community engagement.

Figure 1. Berkeley School District Map and Facility Locations.

A DISTRIBUTED TEAM ANCHORED BY LOCAL CONNECTIONS

The design team for the project was intentionally built with an interdisciplinary focus, bringing together professionals both nationally and locally to contribute to the future vision of the Longfellow facilities. The team was led by Gould Evans, based out of their San Francisco studio. The Gould Evans firm brought professionals with deep personal and professional connections to the Bay area. They also included specialists from across their national presence, including Ricardo Millhouse with expertise in design justice based in their Arizona studio and Michael Ralph with expertise in education based in their Kansas City studio.

The design team also partnered with BASE Landscape Architecture, a women and minority-owned business operated out of San Francisco. BASE's founding principal Patricia Algara and her team were heavily involved throughout the engagement process to study the opportunities to impact the outdoor spaces from very early on in the project. The exterior spaces at Longfellow were a known priority for the project from inception, and BASE personnel also led the effort to design and deliver a multilingual engagement process.

The design team also collaborated with equity and inclusion consultant Milton Reynolds. Based out of the Bay area as well, Milton supported the design team in directly addressing the existing issues of frustration in the community in healthy and honest ways. He provided leadership for the team based on his career as an activist and change-maker to design an engagement schedule that disrupted norms that excluded historically minoritized voices, especially the voices of Latine and Black & African American families.

Finally, the design team partnered closely with BUSD faculty and administration throughout the engagement phase of the project. Longfellow Principal Paco Furlan, Facilities Analyst Chanita Stevenson, Project Manager Ellen Clements, and Executive Director of Facilities John Calise were key contributors

to designing the engagement schedule and facilitating the connections with Longfellow community members throughout the process.

The connections within the community were an important contributor to the success of the engagement process. The recent history of the school included some previous visioning and planning, which contributed to an existing atmosphere of discussion. The engagement process for this project was able to join the existing momentum of these conversations, which was a material benefit to the conversations we had throughout. Another powerful factor in the success of these discussions was the ability of our meeting formats to be held within the existing meeting schedules and structures of the groups we engaged. Instead of holding design meetings and inviting community members to join us, members of the design and facilities team attended the existing meetings for the various stakeholder groups (ex: PTA, Club de Padre, or African Descent Family Village). This approach emphasized the central importance of the community members, rather than centering the designers as the determiners of place and time.

An important note about this engagement process was that it occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the implementation of emergency remote teaching as a public health response. The remote format of engagement introduced both opportunities and challenges. For example, the remote format made the inclusion of design team partners from across the United States very natural, as all participants were virtual regardless of location. However, the loss of the in-person component was more difficult during events like student engagement where the shared space was of increased importance for building a sense of ease and trust with adolescents. Throughout the remainder of this paper, it is important to remember these activities were all contextualized within the relatively unique circumstances of the COVID-19 impacted Spring of 2021.

A MULTILINGUAL PROCESS: SPANISH IMMERSION

A key stakeholder group for the Longfellow engagement process was students and families who prefer to speak Spanish. Preferences for Spanish-based engagement arose from the large fraction of Hispanic students (the largest subgroup based on race or ethnicity in the school) and from the Two-Way Immersion Spanish program at the school that was a major draw for some students in the district. True multilingual engagement requires more than translating English materials into Spanish; a translation-based engagement process continues to center English-speaking norms of communication and omits unique linguistic and cultural elements of Spanish communication. Instead, the team designed a multilingual engagement schedule with tools built for and delivered in Spanish throughout.

The design team began by establishing the fundamental goals of each step throughout the engagement schedule. These were high level questions each event sought to address through a series of exercises or discussion prompts. For example, at one design juncture an engagement goal was to understand what the community priorities were for the limited outdoor sports fields. How often do students use the existing spaces, and what new spaces would students enjoy? Once the team had these goals defined, the team developed engagement opportunities for families who preferred to communicate in Spanish. We were able to work with parents whose children were participants in the Two-Way Immersion program, and we also engaged with the Club de Padres parent group for Spanish-speaking parents in the district.

The design team collaborated on workshop exercises and conversation prompts, but each engagement moment was built in parallel in Spanish/English. Avoiding the "facsimile effect" of a question crafted in English becoming confusing or awkward after a direct translation, the prompts and exercises were developed directly in Spanish by Spanish-fluent team members. Spanish-only workshops had the added benefit of developing the social rhythm of speech that live translations interrupt. English-speaking families are often able to remain unaware of their spoken language as they think about their contributions, and Spanish-speaking families had the same opportunity to focus on their goals for the school project without their language being continually made salient during translation.

Figure 2. Club de Padres Spanish-language Engagement Artifacts.

Figure 3. Longfellow indoor collage. Art credits Longfellow UMOJA students.

AFRICAN DESCENT FAMILY VILLAGE

Our Gould Evans team connected with another key stakeholder group: African Descent Family Village. African Descent Family Village is an equity-oriented parent group at Longfellow Middle School focused on the positive outcomes of African American students. We met online, again in response to the pandemic-related safety measures that impacted every phase of this project. The community members involved in this group were the experts, and the designers were the facilitators of this community-facing process. Members of African Descent Family Village demonstrated the need to design a school setting that reflects the culture, history, and students at the school and the community.

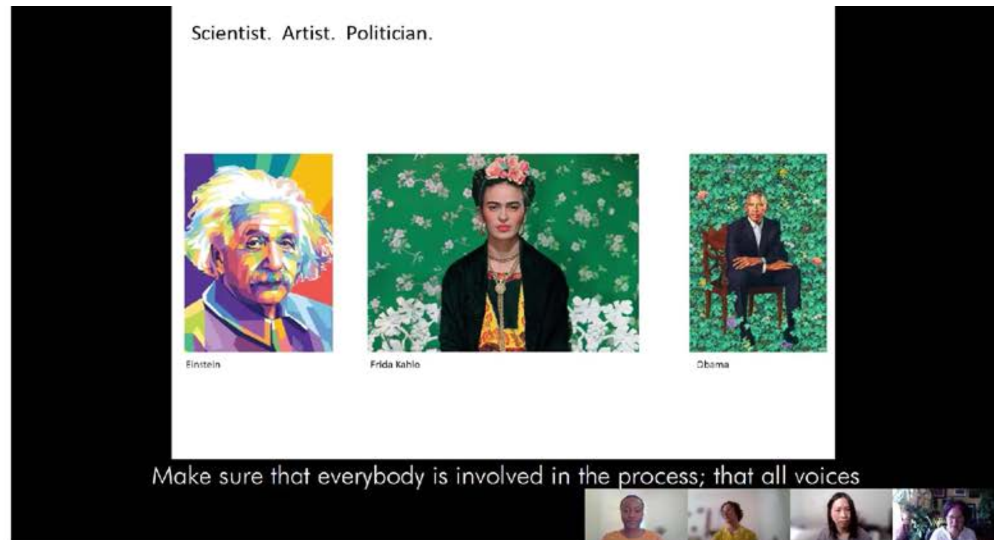
African Descent Family Village parents identified resource gaps that were widened by the allocation of resources. Our listening session—although online— highlighted the need for Gould Evans to pay particular attention to the details, social relationships, and expand the meaning and function of educational spaces, in historical context. Although a slate of concerns was raised by African Descent Family Village, health was a salient theme. Health was already a topic of conversation in many settings throughout the community, which is unsurprising considering we held the listening session during the COVID-19 Pandemic online. One African Descent Family Village parent said,

> "The snack machines in the school are filled with unhealthy, sugary snacks. How can a school want to promote healthy living, but its only options are potato chips and soda?"
>
> —African Descent Family Village Parent

Comments like these highlight the importance of the facility being able to host healthy eating programs. It also came with related comments about campus security, as some of the unhealthy eating options were being provided by unaffiliated vendors operating in the nearby public spaces. Comments from the parent meeting revealed a connection between campus security, outdoor supervision, and student health and wellness goals.

In addition, the Longfellow community voiced a clear need for a track. Students currently run around the block where the school facility is located, which poses safety concerns. Both other middle schools also have campus running spaces, which presents an opportunity to bring Longfellow into equitable alignment with the other campuses. The running track is a central part of the school; it supports the health outcomes of students and its condition should match the students' needs. Further, the track was a pertinent object in a material system that forecloses early-architecture studies to promote the value of social context, interiority[5], and appropriation/configuration. We use interiority rather than "the interior" to express the ways the interior is more than just the inside of a space; interiority considers the social relationships and objects across spaces that are not necessarily focused a singular space, but a system of spaces. These ideas can support students to find new ways of knowing the interior and the impact on health for Longfellow students, staff, and students, even the community.

a) Asynchronous Recorded Webinar



b) Synchronous Online Pin-up

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QUESTION 2: Which type of seating do you prefer? A) Scattered Seating B) Benches with Topography C) Platforms with Planters

c) Synchronous Hybrid Poll & Discussion

Figure 4. Student Engagement Artifacts

EMBEDDING INTO INSTRUCTION

The top priority for everyone on the design team was the development of the students at Longfellow each year, and to support the work of the educators who work with students to promote their development. In recognition of the importance of teaching and learning for the time and energy of students, we designed the student engagement sessions to integrate into the instructional framework of the teachers who were providing the time for the engagement. An essential part of this process was learning about the school framework for making curricular choices in order to fit our engagement strategies and content to what they could use for learning.

An early goal for engaging students was to raise awareness for the project, as we were not sure how much the students themselves had been aware of the formation of the renovation project. An event strategy that connected with 500+ students meant anything synchronous would not allow for 2-way communication, due to the inability of that dialogue to scale. Instead of opting for a 1-way lecture, the team chose to create recorded remarks that could accompany an asynchronous survey tool (Figure 4a). Our goal was that pairing a sharing and listening device in a single engagement moment would give students an opportunity to claim some ownership in the process from the beginning, and to disrupt tendencies for students to feel disempowered when discussing “adult” subjects like facilities projects. While the recorded material was less personal than we would have liked, we were happy with the results of this approach in light of the pandemic limitations on our engagement options. After the initial presentation, we obtained 312 responses from the approximately 500 student body. We judged a 60%+ response rate an encouraging result from our first outreach effort.

The initial webinar included discussion of project goals and early questions for the students to consider, but it also incorporated instructional goals surrounding career exploration for students. We learned throughout the early engagement schedule that a group of teachers in the school represented a curriculum steering committee, and their input was essential to the success of any engagement events we scheduled during the school day. Building this relationship became a high priority after the initial presentation as the design team prepared follow-up engagement visits with smaller groups of students in synchronous conversations.

Subsequent engagement opportunities met with chosen student classes to learn in more detail about how they would hope to see the Longfellow facilities improve, and in what ways they would use renovated spaces. The chosen classes included an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class and a student leadership group, with the selection process balancing the teacher’s ability to include the outreach opportunity within their curriculum and the design team’s goal of engagement a variety of student voices. Balancing these factors during scheduling made the connections with the curriculum steering committee and building administration essential to avoiding the engagement sessions becoming another external imposition. Instead, the conversations matched the instructors’ goals for how they use their class time. When guest presenters enter a classroom isolated from the larger curriculum, they displace the shared goals of the class and center their own priorities for the time. This kind of disruptive visit is inherently marginalizing. In these workshop sessions, the design team sought to visit classes for which the conversations were natural continuations of the learning process, and in entering sought to enter the established classroom culture within the local framework of norms. The class continued to observe existing beginning-of-class routines, attended to long-term announcements and discussion, and participated in their usual format of online behavior. All classes occurred during the COVID-19 safety precautions, and the sessions emphasized that students could continue to use cameras and voice chat as they usually would (which was minimally). Instead, we leveraged the text chat and polling tools for students to contribute. As students became more comfortable in the session, some chose to participate via video and audio—however, it was never an expectation.

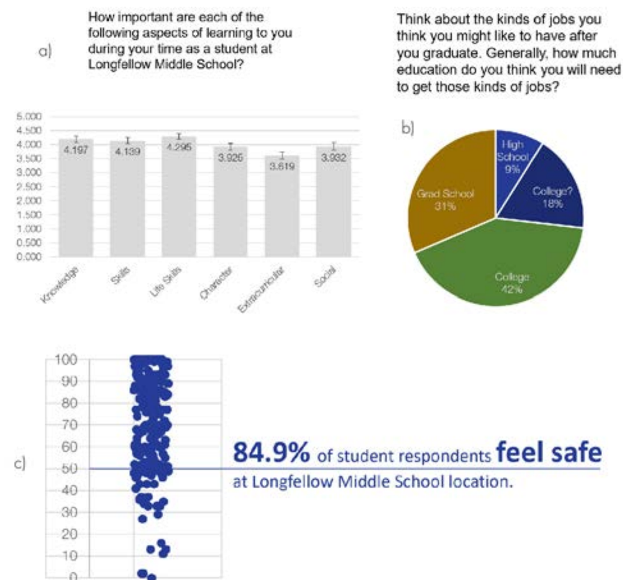

Figure 5. Data Visualizations from Community Engagement Surveys

REFLECTIONS ON ANALYSIS

The engagement phase of a project must effectively translate findings from community conversations into project outcomes, otherwise the team squanders the time and energy the community has invested sharing their stories. Academia and design practice share a tendency to present project stories with a linearizing effect of hindsight, but making space for many voices in the engagement process must disrupt the tendency to reduce findings to the loudest or most dominant trends - we must find ways to synthesize from engagement while preserving the truth

that one locale often contains a multiplicity of perspectives, which can result in findings that contain tensions or outright contradictions. The design team must recognize the inevitable messiness of these conversations and plan strategies to draw insights without reductive, marginalizing analysis.

Synthesizing from engagement workshops and focus groups should intentionally include counternarratives[5] to major findings when they exist in participant responses. Prioritizing the loudest or most common voices in an interview, focus group, or survey can lead to erasure of minoritized voices. Reporting counternarratives can include summarizing contrary arguments, including quotes from dissenting opinions, or providing external data to contextualize major themes with relevant opposing findings (such as historical or public data).

Presenting quantitative data should include a similar orientation to recognizing the contextualized role of interpretation. Drawing from the tenants of QuantCrit[6], researchers should explicitly provide both explanation and analysis of their quantitative methods to justify their findings. Quantitative data should similarly not be reduced to singular voices, and visualization techniques should preserve the variation with polling and survey findings (Figure 5). Even when it may appear a question presents with overwhelming agreement, closer analysis can reveal counternarratives with design implications. For example, in Figure 5c a survey question generated data for which 85% of survey respondents moved the slider in the positive direction from an initial state (set at 50, although unlabeled to respondents). However, a smaller group of respondents responded that the school was "very unsafe" - operationalized as a response in the lowest quintile of the slider. This small group of students merits representation in engagement findings, as understanding the experiences that lead even this minority group of students to feel very unsafe is required to pursue a goal of *every* student feeling safe in school. Our visualization strategy of using univariate scatter plots was able to convey both the general tendency of students to feel safe in the school location AND the presence of a group of students who feel unsafe.

CONCLUSION

We are proud of the Longfellow engagement process as an example of centering local voices throughout a robust project engagement process. We were pleased to engage students and families, especially those who preferred to communicate in Spanish. We also recognized that despite the impact we were able to have by engaging the African Descent Family Village, we still aspire to see a greater level of participation from African American and Black families. As we reflect upon this project and plan for future engagement strategies, this will be an area of focus.

So much of effective, localistic engagement is dependent on context. As the design team reflects on our findings and the design applications emerging throughout the remainder of the project, we are also imagining how to design similarly localistic engagement strategies for future projects. Local connections develop through trust, which is earned by being in relation with the community. We believe the design team connections to the local community were an essential first step in designing our engagement process, and future project teams can similarly prepare their proposed project teams with consideration of how they can include local design firms as part of collaborations. The local partnership should include not only design firms, but also consultants and activists who are already working on the problems most relevant to the forthcoming projects. Community artists, organizers, activists, and religion leaders all have valuable contributions they can make to an engagement process by helping design teams recognize how to target their outreach efforts in ways most likely to reach those who have historically been overlooked due to their race, ethnicity, religious, location, socioeconomic status, physical ability, or any other dimension of human identity or experience.

The second takeaway from this project was the recognition that making space in engagement must be continually enacted throughout the process. Initial schedules change, and they did in the Longfellow project. Expected participants shift, and they did in this project as well. Planning for the inherent changes of a project process needs to include a resolution to change, adapt, reschedule, and otherwise act when the team recognizes something needs to change. Deadlines will always be a source of stress on projects, and prior planning with event triage (which events are more easily rescheduled or cancelled) and goals for participation (which can help the team recognize when certain community members were not able to participate as hoped) can make it easier to respond quickly when adjustments need to be made. The specific context of each project makes more concrete recommendations difficult, but a commitment to localistic engagement represents an opportunity for every project to be better prepared to deliver excellent outcomes for the teachers and students of any community.

ENDNOTES

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