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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Tree of Community Knowledge and Engagement

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Abstract

Deep-seated educational discourses have blamed low-income communities for their youth's lack of high school completion. These deficit discourses reflect top-down knowledge hierarchies and a lack of knowledge democracy in education ([de Sousa Santos 2007](#); [Hall & Tandon 2017](#); [Visvanathan 2009](#)), and they are in need of 'critical and diverse knowledge reckoning' (Malone 2019, p. 2) by low-income communities themselves. This article relays how a community-university participatory action research (PAR) partnership became a dynamic site of knowledge democracy from which to counter and transform deficit-based knowledge systems imposed on economically disadvantaged communities. Steeped in the generative enactments of PAR, storytelling, ecological metaphor, strength-based approaches and the arts, this article explores a low-income/social housing community's knowledge practices that are energising and growing its community power to support the success of their youth in school. These seven knowledge practices are narrated through the ecological metaphor of trees, specifically via a co-constructed PAR team narrative called the *Tree of Community Knowledge and Engagement*. In the telling and retelling of this counternarrative-in-the-making, this article embodies knowledge democracy. Here, community members' energising knowledge practices are recognised as invaluable forms of everyday educational knowing and leadership for their youth. This article further explores three broad ways of knowing that reside within and across community members' seven knowledge practices: lived knowing, interconnected

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knowing and participatory/power-in-relation knowing. The three community ways of knowing illustrate how the community is growing its power to support youth's success via a transformative educational worldview, from which other schools and universities could learn and, indeed, thrive.

Key words:

participatory action research, knowledge democracy, low-income communities, marginalised youth, high school, cognitive justice

Introduction

Deep-seated societal, educational and professional discourses have blamed low-income communities for their youth's lack of high school completion ([Aber & Nieto 2000](#); [Neiuwenhuis, Hooimeijer & Meeus 2015](#)). Low-income communities, including social housing communities, have been reported to have inadequate skills, poor attitudes towards education, and no clear educational expectations and/or supports for youth to succeed academically ([Aber & Nieto 2000](#); [Neiuwenhuis, Hooimeijer & Meeus 2015](#)). Schools perpetuate the notion of low-income students and their communities as a 'culture of poverty' when seen through the lens of 'cultural deficit' ([Gonzalez et al. 2005](#), p. 36). Epistemologies which discount or marginalise community members' own ways of knowing how to support youth's success in school perpetuate knowledge hierarchies and lack knowledge equity and democracy ([de Sousa Santos 2007](#); [Hall & Tandon 2017](#); [Visvanathan 2009](#)). By contrast, an emphasis on knowledge democracy furthers social, ecological and democratic justice by recognising the value of diverse knowledges and the ways such multiplicities of knowing can reside in tandem with and/or challenge formalised knowledges, such as 'officially' sanctioned educational curricula ([Hall & Tandon 2017](#)). By focusing on forms of 'critical and diverse knowledge reckoning' (Malone 2019, p. 2) – in other words, on a dynamic reimagining and redefining of what knowledge is via critique and expansion – this article builds on the notion of a 'knowledge democracy'. It does so in order to connect the 'values of justice, fairness and action' to the creation and use of knowledge ([Hall & Tandon 2017](#), p. 13) in relation to a particular low-income community. Our research shows a need to redefine educational 'knowers', i.e. those whose knowledge of how to support youth's high school success is considered valuable and legitimate. When education systems recognise and engage social housing communities as equal knowers and participants in education, these community members can support more equitable understanding of educational knowledge and transformation of the educational system into one that more successfully supports their low-income youth's educational success. Our work highlights social housing communities' accounts of their own knowledge practices and strengths and thus participation in necessary change. The power, inspiration and change potential of community members' knowledge practices are this study's most impactful research 'outcome'.

An inter-generational community-university participatory action research (PAR) team co-gathered and co-explored social housing community members' energising knowledge practices of supporting their youth's school success. As a PAR team, we defined energising knowledge practices as actions, behaviours, thoughts, emotions and interpersonal engagements that low-income community members *themselves* experience and/or understand as igniting, inspiring, energising and/or empowering in their daily lives. The 'knowledge' of 'knowledge practices'

highlights that this research gives power and validity to low-income community members' knowledge that is equal to academic knowledge. The 'practices' part of the term 'knowledge practices' emphasises knowledge, or ways of knowing, rooted in lived, localised, embodied experience. Such knowledge is not abstract but is imbued with individual and collective experiences that community members carry into their lives and improve on in response to the strengths and challenges of daily life, such as unstable socioeconomic conditions. Energising knowledge practices are described by participants with words like 'positive', 'inspiring', 'energising', 'celebrating', 'moving forward' and 'working so well'. Sometimes energy is implicit in participants' stories, as in accounts of sharing, togetherness, pride and personal growth. At other points in the storytelling process, the energising aspect of knowledge practices is non-verbal and is reflected in participants' physical actions and reactions.

This article captures the language, ideas and physical reactions of community members and the PAR team (for example, by quoting participants' stories and through the PAR team's tree image). The article also draws on academic language, research and discourse in order to give credibility in this venue – an academic journal – to the knowledge relayed in the research. Through the research's multiple modes of dissemination (e.g. a mural in the community centre and an academic article) and discourses (community members' stories and educational/social justice literature and analysis), this article models a community-university partnership through dissemination as well as process.

As team members, we steeped ourselves in the generative enactments of PAR and emphasised storytelling, ecological metaphor, strengths-based approaches and the arts. Our team's research became a site of critical and restorative engagements from which to counter and transform deficit-based knowledge systems and inequitable 'power relations of knowing' imposed on economically disadvantaged communities. While articles on PAR research often emphasise process, this article centres our findings on community members' knowledge, with the direct intent of challenging abstract academic knowledge of low-income communities' lives, which often frames them in terms of deficit. Our PAR team emphasised the sharing of findings about community members' knowledge. We constructed a written and visual narrative, using the ecological metaphor of trees, called the *Tree of Community Knowledge and Engagement*, to relay community members' seven core energising knowledge practices. The wall-sized mural (Figure 1), located in the public hallway of the social housing community centre, symbolises the claiming and celebrating of community members' energising knowledge practices and their multifaceted support of community youth's school success. The tree mural is, moreover, an invitation for ongoing horizontal dialogue and community exchange via storytelling. Building on the PAR tree's richness, the co-authors developed a three-part ontology of knowing, or what we, the authors, have called the tree's canopy, that encompasses community members' seven knowledge practices, while, at the same time, resonating with each of the seven community knowledge practices.

Low-income communities, knowledge democracy, and youth success in high school

Youth's non-completion of high school is a complex issue involving many factors that occur over time in students' lives ([Tilleczek 2008](#)). Low socioeconomic status is often cited as the most prevalent influence on early school leaving ([Tilleczek et al. 2008](#)), suggesting a significant impact of the youth's neighbourhood context on their development and educational achievement ([Neuwenhuis, Hooimeijer & Meeus 2015](#); [Wodtke, Harding & Elwert 2011](#)).

Studies on low-income communities often focus on what is *lacking* in these contexts via theories and concepts such as social isolation, social disorganisation, or socioeconomic stress ([Aber & Nieto 2000](#); [Sykes & Kuyper 2009](#); [Wodtke, Harding & Elwert 2011](#)) rather than exploring communities' own ways of knowing that foster agency and wellbeing. By failing to highlight or even explore communities' strengths, cognitive or epistemic injustice can occur ([de Sousa Santos 2007](#); [Hall & Tandon 2017](#); [Visvanathan 2009](#)). In contrast with such epistemological injustice towards marginalised persons/communities, 'knowledge democracy' recognises 'the existence of multiple epistemologies', celebrates diverse expressions of knowledge creation and representation, and views knowledge as a 'powerful tool for taking action' for social justice, democracy and wellbeing across human and ecological communities, both locally and globally ([Hall & Tandon 2017](#), p. 13). For example, recognising the challenges of engaging low-income youth due to their disconnection from or skepticism of institutions, [Yoshitaka Iwasaki \(2015\)](#) conveys how vital youth-led initiatives are. Truly collaborative, strengths-based approaches create a research process that is empowering for marginalised people and youth specifically in Iwasaki's work. Such methods lead to meaningful, holistic changes and action for these individual youth and their community, as Iwasaki's work demonstrates. Our article also challenges and transforms the marginalisation or erasure of communities' local knowledge through a celebration of the multiplicity of knowledges.

As low-income communities become change agents for educational justice ([Smyth 2009](#); [Warren & Mapp 2011](#)), a crucial shift from 'intervention in the community to community as intervention' takes place ([Eheart et al. 2009](#), p. 47). Knowledge democracy is of particular importance to this change work. Equitable education begins with recognition of the diverse strengths and contributions of low-income communities' strengths-based ways of knowing and acting. If inequitable school-community power relations are to be reduced, communities *and* schools need to value low-income communities' knowledge practices, which are connected to their own traditions, histories, experiences and identities ([Warren & Mapp 2011](#)). Democratic community-university research partnerships, with their emphasis on equitable power relations, are key to igniting such thoughtful epistemological realignment or critical and diverse knowledge reckoning.

Local context, perspectives and research process

An umbrella organisation for social housing in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), Canada, sought to increase the educational success of youth living in these communities. As a member of this organization, the director of a local community centre contacted this article's first author to discuss a potential research partnership to improve the high school graduation in her own social housing community, the Rabbittown Community, located in St. John's, NL. Numerous youth in the Rabbittown community had been research participants in a prior PAR study by Gardner et al. and conversations led to the creation of a community-university PAR study.

Participatory action research (PAR) is 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' ([Elliott 1991](#), p. 6). PAR is tied to democratic and social justice principles and goals in both the research process and anticipated social actions. A 14-member PAR team was established, comprising community centre staff and volunteers, youth and adult community members, community association members and university researchers, including two master's students, a postdoctoral researcher and a Faculty of Education professor. Team collaborations occurred via team meetings, four team retreat days, and phone and email correspondence. The academic researchers supported the

team's learning about PAR and researcher roles, while community team members situated, translated and expanded these learnings within the context of their community's socio-culture context, thereby supporting the co-construction of knowledge and processes of engagement. Community and university team members planned and implemented the study as a democratic partnership, in terms of research questions, participant outreach, and data analysis and dissemination. Team members contributed diverse strengths of knowledge, skills, interests and experiences. Team-building activities took place and decisions were made via team dialogue.

The team reached an early consensus to explore the community's strengths, contributions, energy and visions related to supporting youth success in school. Team members were not interested in adopting deficit-based perspectives, sharing that 'there is enough of that already out there' about social housing. It 'wasn't the problems' that needed attention but 'what is working', and, in the words of one community member, our 'strengths' reflect 'what we are about as a community'. Strengths-based perspectives assume that all individuals, groups and communities possess assets, engage in successful practices and have capacities to become 'abundant communities' that ignite and build their own community power ([Gardner & Toope 2011](#); [Kretzmann & McKnight 1993](#)). The team viewed the gathering of community members' stories about their knowledge practices as an assertion of the community's strengths and power. Story-telling was a natural (i.e. comfortable, meaningful) way for community members to share experiences and for the team to collect 'data'. After all, '[h]umans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives' and 'tell stories of those lives' ([Connelly & Clandinin 1990](#), p. 2).

Ninety-three community members from the urban 294-unit social housing community participated in the study, including community centre staff and volunteers, adult and youth community members, youth's parents/families, and community association members. Potential participants were recruited through face-to-face contact, emails and telephone conversations. Participants had the choice to participate via individual interview, focus group and/or community forum. Data was collected via nine focus groups, two individual interviews and four community forums that were part of community-wide events. Approximately one-third of participants were youth (29) and two-thirds were adults (64). All data collection events were mixed in terms of participant demographics (e.g. age, gender, education, profession). During these semi-structured data-gathering forums, team members invited participants to share stories of supporting youth success in school, particularly experiences in which they felt energized, inspired and/or ignited. Participants were also invited to envision ways of further building community power and to discuss factors impeding their vision. Participant data was collected via audio-tape (and transcribed) and/or via researcher notes (typed or handwritten).

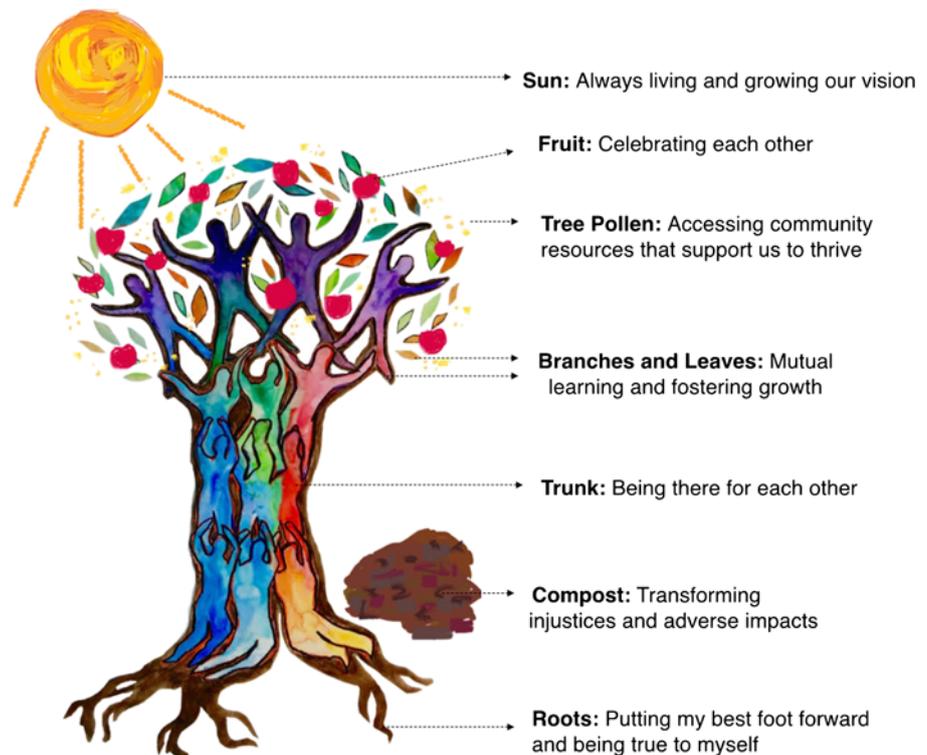
Consistent with PAR's cycles of action and reflection, data analyses were ongoing processes. Our team goals were to: listen to, discuss, reflect on, interpret and share participants' stories. Our meaning-making was guided by the hermeneutic circle of continually relating the whole body of data to its parts ([Porter & Robinson 2011](#)). The team began by reflecting on community members' stories without imposing categories or themes. Next, the team examined stories and practices of supporting youth success and of being energised in these contributions across and within each grouping (e.g. youth, parents, community centre staff). The team identified key knowledge practices and themes. Data analysis processes involved continual telling and retelling, constructing and reconstructing, as data and analyses proliferated and became organised. The team identified seven community knowledge practices for supporting youth success in school, which the *Tree of Community Knowledge and Engagement* relays. These

findings further led to the co-authors' articulation of the three-part ontology of knowing, or what we have called the tree's canopy, which sweeps across community members' seven knowledge practices, while simultaneously dwelling within each practice.

Tree of Community Knowledge and Engagement

During a team retreat, team members explored metaphors as 'rich and relatable ways of conveying interpretations' that could relay the research findings' power (Moules et al. 2015, p. 133). Through felt-sense and reflection, the team identified with the ecological metaphor of the tree, both in its whole and in its parts, as representative of community knowledge practices. Many cultures view trees as symbols of knowledge and wisdom, inviting alignment with the community's deep understanding of how best to support their youth. Rooted in community, family and individual identities and histories, this community's knowledge practices have longevity, like trees, because they are embodied and energising (e.g. life-giving, sustaining). Always living in relation to their environments, community members, like trees, also embody continual learning and knowledge creation via everyday life. The tree represents the community's seven core knowledge practices of supporting youth success in school: (a) roots of putting my best foot forward while being true to myself; (b) trunk of being there for each other; (c) branches and leaves of mutual learning and fostering each other's growth; (d) pollen of accessing community resources that support us to thrive; (e) fruit and apples of celebrating each other; (f) compost of supporting youth success amidst injustices and their adverse impacts; and (g) sun of always living and growing our vision. This section briefly overviews the tree's seven community knowledge practices, their key characteristics and connections to the tree metaphor (see Figure 1).

Tree of Community Knowledge and Engagement



ROOTS: PUTTING MY BEST FOOT FORWARD WHILE BEING TRUE TO MYSELF

Community members powerfully articulated their personal values, ideals and visions in the midst of hardships and inequities. The tree roots represent individual members' knowledge practices that ground and nourish them as they support youth school success.

Root knowledge practices:

- Rooting myself in the person I am and want to be
- Staying true to myself despite hardships and inequities

Story of root knowledge practices:

'I'm always putting positive messages out there on Facebook. I'm always talking about things that are very important in life and society. And then, I see my kids turn out and either share something I put out there or they've responded to something I've said and I've seen them share it with their other friends...it makes you feel really inspired and energised, it just puts you in a whole new plateau...'. – Parent

TRUNK: BEING THERE FOR EACH OTHER

Community members shared stories of trunk knowledge practices, of having a strong community core by standing tall by being there for each other and ensuring everyone supports youth school success.

Trunk knowledge practices:

- Helping each other and working together
- Sharing what we have
- Knowing our voice counts

Stories of trunk knowledge practices:

'We are relating to where youth are in terms of their schooling'. – Staff

'As a community we're here for each other ... We collaborate so well together that people within our community know that if they need that support, it will be there'. – Staff

BRANCHES AND LEAVES: MUTUAL LEARNING AND FOSTERING GROWTH

Community members are both teachers and learners, fostering greater mutuality and equality. Just as growing branches and leaves reflect a tree's flourishing, mutual learning inspires collective growth in supporting youth success.

Branches and leaves knowledge practices:

- Experiencing mutual learning
- Utilising and valuing community knowledge, experience and practice
- Witnessing each other's growth

Stories of branches and leaves knowledge practices:

'You don't always have to be the teacher – sometimes your kids are'. – Adult

‘It is totally energising to see growth and change in others... In this community we inspire one another’. – Parent

‘When youth share their viewpoint, I am learning too ... ways to make changes so that our programs work better for them’. – Staff

POLLEN: ACCESSING COMMUNITY RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT US TO THRIVE

Just as pollen supports the fertilisation and reproduction of trees, the community engages pollen knowledge practices when they access community centre resources that support youth to thrive, both directly and implicitly.

Pollen knowledge practices:

- Engaging community resources
- Contributing to the community
- Feeling valued and at home
- Being supported and met by others where we currently are in our lives
- Helping us look towards where we want to go

Stories of pollen knowledge practices:

‘In school, you are judged for your sexuality, clothing, way you look, size, skills, intelligence but at the Community Centre you aren’t judged even when we are different from each other’. – Youth

‘It’s not the Centre staff’s building. It’s the community’s building’. – Staff

APPLE: CELEBRATING EACH OTHER

Like enjoying a tree’s fruit after carefully tending to its growth, community members’ apple stories relay the community successes and celebrations.

Apple knowledge practices:

- Celebrating accomplishments, both large and small, as a ‘big deal’
- Knowing that youth’s successes are about more than academic success
- Celebrating youth’s accomplishments as successes for the whole community

Stories of apple knowledge practices:

‘My dad cried when I got a scholarship’. – Youth

‘Youth success in school is a success for the whole community’. – Parent

‘Success is usually measured by wealth. But what is wealth? Wealth is lots of things. To us, wealth is family and friends. It is internal. It’s who we are. It’s how we pray’. – Adult

‘... we’re celebrating their [youth’s] accomplishments at each moment as ... they’re going through struggles and getting out of that struggle, we’re celebrating that they get over that hurdle’. – Staff

COMPOST: TRANSFORMING INJUSTICES AND ADVERSE IMPACTS

Community members negotiate injustices and their adverse impacts, inspiring others to support youth. Compost knowledge practices are members transforming adversity, nurturing the conditions for change, and taking actions to create hope, possibilities and new life.

Compost knowledge practices:

- Recognising and dismantling injustices via critical reflection, resistance and transformation
- Engaging in hope, understanding and compassion to heal and transform the adverse impacts of injustice

Stories of compost knowledge practices:

‘Understanding youths’ situations and home lives is important. Just because a kid has a bad attitude or acts badly does not make them a bad kid. Seeing the good in youth even if they have a bad reputation is how I see things and is important to me’. – Parent

‘Never give up! Some teachers give up on you very easy if you don’t get it’. – Youth

‘Overcoming challenges is one big facet of our community’. – Staff

SUN: ALWAYS LIVING AND GROWING OUR VISION

Imagining and envisioning the future energises community members. Just as the sun is essential to a tree’s life and growth, vision is central to the community’s hope, agency and light.

Sun knowledge practices:

- Living our vision
- Doing more of what is working well
- Imagining new possibilities

Stories of sun knowledge practices:

‘... with this research it allows us to stop, look at what we’re doing, what’s working well ... how we should be moving forward, whereas if we didn’t do this we would be moving forward but it would have been a lot slower pace’. – Staff

‘We want the Centre to be a place that feels like home, where everyone is involved and connected, where everyone is always learning and growing, and where everyone is working together as one’. – Staff

Canopy of ontological knowing

The tree’s canopy further illustrates the significance of community members’ empowering knowledge practices. The canopy sweeps across the community members’ seven core knowledge practices while simultaneously dwelling within each knowledge practice. This canopy has three parts: lived knowing, interconnected knowing and participatory/power-in-relation knowing. The interwoven canopy reflects an ontology or life-source energy from which community members’ knowledge practices germinate and bloom. Drawing from members’ stories, experiences and memories, this section explores the connections between the three-part canopy and members’ seven knowledge practices.

LIVED KNOWING

Community members' seven core knowledge practices, described above, are all examples of lived knowing, the first part of the tree's canopy. Knowledge practices are rooted in community members' own direct experience and in community spaces. The community members see and grow their embodied – not conceptual or abstract – knowledge practices through first-hand experience of navigating the complexities, constraints, possibilities and nuances of their daily life, including their contexts, strengths, values, identities and dreams. Whether sharing stories of putting their best foot forward (roots), being there for each other (trunk), mutual learning (branches and leaves) or breaking down injustices and their adverse impacts (compost), the community is energised in supporting youth success via lived knowing practices. Community members sow tree knowledge practices in their local home communities, so their wisdom, struggle, strength and ongoing transformations collectively belong to the community as their living (breathing) knowledge. The tree reflects the sustenance of the community's wisdom and the emergence of knowledge creation, like the ongoing growth of a tree's inner rungs reflects its development.

Dominant educational cultures strive to fix social housing community knowledge by delivering what is deemed to be the 'correct' knowledge necessary for high school graduation, thereby marginalising the community's own ways of knowing. Our research sought to rupture these cognitive injustices and inequitable knowledge hierarchies ([de Sousa Santos 2007](#); [Hall & Tandon 2017](#); [Visvanathan 2009](#)) by giving power and voice to community members' lived knowledge practices. Via PAR, the team engaged community members as knowers and knowledge co-constructors of their lives, stories and experiences via democratic horizontal practices. Community members spoke in their own 'language' and ways of knowing within their community contexts. During a storytelling focus group at the community centre, one parent said that this process 'did not feel like research' but like 'neighbours chatting'. The authors noticed the repetition of personal pronouns across the storytelling – I, me, we, us – emphasising that community members' knowledge practices are rooted in their own lived experiences. The PAR team witnessed the research participants' collective ownership of their knowledge practices as they often seamlessly 'took over' the dialogue with their wealth of empowering memories and stories. Participants invited the research team into deep listening, presence and learning.

While initially defining social housing in terms of social-economic precarity, many community members shared stories of transforming such views through direct experience of community living (an example of a compost knowledge practice). Drawing from his experience living in social housing, a community centre staff member stated, 'If I hear someone say something negative about social housing, I challenge them'. Participants shared stories of togetherness and mutual support that benefit all members, including youth. A parent shared coming together as a community when there is a lack of food:

That's like with meals a couple of days before everyone is getting money and whatever you might have a few potatoes in your house, I might have a bit of carrot or whatever. We ... all get together and throw it all in one pot and whatever we came up with everybody ate. Nobody walked away hungry.

The community's lived knowing of working together (trunk knowledge practice) ensures youth have enough to eat to support their learning. Through ongoing community knowledge traditions – not one-off, expert interventions – youth learn the community's wisdom of how collaboration supports shared success. Many youth adapt this lived knowing to their own

contexts, recounting stories of helping each other with homework (branches/leaves knowledge practice) and supporting one another during tough times at school (roots, trunk). Community research participants are educators in their own right, modelling positive change for youth, other community members and the research team.

Storytelling's horizontal dialogue paired with PAR's explicit social justice/democratic tenets fostered safe openings for participants to narrate structural injustices. The sharing of such injustices is often dismissed as 'whining' or taboo in other contexts. As one parent said, 'It can be tough trying to help our kids through school. Talking about it now, I know I'm not crazy to feel this way. It helps'. Our PAR storytelling focus groups often became spaces for participants to collectively recognise that they are 'not the problem', nor are they 'imagining things'. Community members often then recognised that their youth-supporting knowledge practices are a 'big deal' and are successes for the whole community. In passionately advising his peers, based on his direct school experience, to 'Never give up!', one youth went on to exclaim that 'Some teachers give up on you very easy if you don't get it. They think you're a lost cause, especially if you're in 'basic' courses, because you're not on their level'. In observing this youth's claim and modelling his lived knowing of the need to stand up to injustice, the focus group recognised that he was supporting the whole community's success. He was deconstructing injustice (compost knowledge practice), being true to himself and putting his best foot forward (roots), and celebrating his success of challenging injustice as a 'big deal' (apples).

While challenges are pervasive in this community, participants identify and celebrate their community's strengths, such as their close, supportive environment. For its members, this social housing community is an asset, not a liability. For example, one participant stated:

We ... are an actual community ... [we] know each other ... and not just your neighbour next door but it could be two streets over ... you're inspiring each other ... to do better as a community member in your community. That's just huge.

Members' lived experiences of belonging to an 'actual community' foster many energising knowledge practices directly tied to supporting youth school success. A favourite story was how good it feels to be seen as a 'parent' by community youth. One adult recounted, 'So many kids in the community call me "Mom". There's nothing feels any better'. Members view their support of youth as a community-wide issue, which, in turn, inspires the whole community; in this case, the young person feels supported, while the adult becomes a second 'Mom'. Youth described eating meals, hanging out and doing homework at the homes of neighbourhood 'Moms'.

While the community's support of youth success has histories rooted in place and community, such lived knowing is not stagnant. Members identified how their knowledge practices evolve and expand to gather community dreams, resources and strengths. For instance, two centre staff members, who were raised in the community, infuse their neighbourhood's history of lived knowing into their own leadership styles by centring the community's knowledge, strengths and contributions. These staff members also ensure that the community centre belongs to community members, while simultaneously inviting local residents to keep living and growing their vision (sun knowledge practice).

The creation of varied and accessible physical representations of community members' lived knowing – for example, the wall-sized tree mural, a community pamphlet shared with neighbourhood households, a youth skit celebrating knowledge practices – fostered knowledge democracy by acknowledging, celebrating and sharing the power of the community's lived knowing. These accessible representations invite engagements of sight, touch, sound and feel,

akin to the community's lived knowledge practices. Through PAR's social justice commitments, the team did not psychologise, objectify or decontextualise community members. Specifically, the seven core knowledge practices (i.e. research findings) are firmly rooted in the community's contexts, experiences, histories and knowing.

INTERCONNECTED KNOWING

The community's knowledge practices are not just lived, they are also interconnected, overlapping and in tandem with one another. The community functions like a tree – a living community drawing from the canopy of its ecosystem of roots, trunk, leaves and pollen. For example, during a storytelling focus group, a member highlighted the vitality of community interconnectedness, saying 'it's kind of like each person in our community joins in a web ... and then spreads out from there'. Such interconnection gives life and energy to community support of youth's education success. Members' interconnected knowledge practices highlight the rich multidimensionality of community knowing and engagement.

Schools that frame low-income youth and their communities as lacking the knowledge to support student success or schools that are primarily interested in official school knowledge strategies (e.g. attending parent–teacher nights) propagate forms of epistemological injustice. Top–down, expert, logical, reductionist and problem-based knowledge approaches do not offer visibility or justice to communities' rich, overlapping and flexible knowings. The tree's energising, interconnected knowledge practices make this epistemicide explicit. Through our PAR strengths-based, transformative approaches, our team, in partnership with the community, excavated and celebrated interconnected knowing's range and fullness, including realities of injustice and adverse impacts. PAR's open dialogue, storytelling as research method and the emphasis on metaphor invited this weaving of community members' multiple ways of knowing. During storytelling events, community members collectively reflected on the past, clarifying, contextualising and adding to stories; they also connected the past to the present while imagining the future. Interconnected knowings draw from multiple, complex social relationships, re-establishing, strengthening and growing relationships, thus igniting community strength and power.

In everyday life, community members engage in multiple knowledge practices at once. Youth and adults volunteering at the community centre's after-school program simultaneously engage in knowledge practices of being there for themselves (roots), practising mutual growth (branches/leaves), helping youth access resources to thrive (pollen) and celebrating successes (apples). Members' interconnected knowing is often formed through their multiple roles – community centre staff, parent, child, neighbour. This flexible interplay between individuals' many roles ignites possibilities for them to be true to themselves and to meaningfully support each other. These interconnections build collective capacity, supporting collaborative support of youth. For instance, a youth spoke of the power of a community centre girls' social group. Both youth and staff shared more of their life stories than they would in other contexts (trunk, compost, sun). These exchanges, in turn, fostered mutual learning (branches/leaves) and success (apples) in the young women's lives; through these conversations, these youth made connections between disparate parts of their lives and amongst each other. Like a tree, the community grows its life-enhancing knowledge practices via the interconnectedness of its collective roots, trunk, leaves and branches.

The horizontal, democratic dialogue, fostered by the team's PAR methods, storytelling, and metaphor (i.e. the tree), fostered community engagement. Through this engagement,

members created a diverse, expansive and holistic vision of community knowing and strengths. As one member said of the research, ‘This is the first time we have a community vision that comes from the whole community ... youth, families, volunteers, staff, other residents ... We have not had that kind of input from the whole community before ... This is important’ (sun). Interconnected knowing enables new understandings of one’s community, including its members, strengths, constraints, relationships and possibilities for further transformation.

Interconnected knowing can be life-changing when put into action. For example, many members voiced fear of being reported to the governmental social housing agencies. One participant recalled a New Canadian single-parent family who had been ‘keeping to themselves’ while adjusting to their new community but were facing imminent eviction. The ‘... family had a problem. They were gonna get evicted because they didn’t have their house cleaned up’. This participant described the community response:

Within two days a group of community members all got together, went down to her house, said, ‘Look we know you’re in a bit of trouble. We can help’. She was hesitant at first but she said, ‘Well, okay’ ... they painted it, got it all straightened up for her, she lived there for many years her kids were ... more playful with the other kids ... And like she got to know who everybody was.

In this story, the community weaves many knowledge practices. This participant celebrated the actively caring neighbours and the mother’s courage to trust ‘unknown’ residents during a crisis (apple). The mother then composted this crisis by embracing greater community connection. Education happens in the community as well as in the school: members model community support and power for each other, energise themselves by sharing their best selves and values, and empower others, including youth. Interconnected knowing ignites personal, family, community and educational transformations.

PARTICIPATORY/POWER-IN-RELATION KNOWING

Community support of youth’s school success is rooted in participatory, power-in-relation knowing. Across their varied roles/groupings (e.g. staff, youth, gender, ethnicity, dis/ability), members’ energising practices highlight relational power and engagements that are mutually enhancing and co-creating. In contrast with hierarchical or authoritarian top-down power or power-over approaches, power-in-relation knowing reflects ‘a direct relationship, between a democratic form of life and how ... we are able to realise our capacities as human beings’ (Couldry 2019, p. 69). A member shared an example of mutual learning and contribution:

... we’re a community that teaches one another, we have a lot to offer... there are so many brilliant and wonderful people here, there are people who are musicians, ... artists ... good academically ... great mechanically ... people here who have talent beyond talent.

Examples of democratic power-in-relation include youth studying together at the community centre as well as laughing, crying and socialising together as they navigate school challenges (trunk and compost).

Community stories of participatory/power-in-relation knowing often described mutual inspiration, such as members’ courage to offer each other what they have (resources, advice, time, affection, expertise), despite social-educational barriers/injustices. An example of power-in-relation knowing is a Mom navigating the grey zone of help and harm, good and bad, specifically in relation to her son: ‘Those people who have the worst names in the community

are the very people who are going out of their way to give my youth recyclables because they see my youth going around looking for recyclables'. This Mom acknowledged individuals' strengths amidst stigma.

The community centre is a key site of shared power. One youth experienced shared power and voice with staff: 'At the [community] centre, we have voice with the activities. They let us choose, unlike school, where teachers push their opinions on others and are biased.' A community elder, linking school success and community engagement, said that the 'community garden' is the 'best thing happening in this community'. Members come freely, 'chatting' as 'equals' and sharing stories without the 'pressure' of presumed roles, expectations or reputations while their hands grow food. For many, the centre feels like 'home' and is a 'hub' for supporting youth success. Both informal supports like chatting in the garden and formal ones (e.g. youth leadership programs and homework clubs) are imbued with forms of mutual power: community members define relationships which benefit them.

Energising power-in-relation knowledge practices that support youth success often occur in daily life's minutiae. Knowledge practices are commonly quiet, informal, organic and/or unrecognised. For example, one youth described how she and her boyfriend were allies; he ensures she gets up for school in the morning. Knowledge practices are often not conferred epistemological value because they are not school sanctioned or professionally led interventions. For example, a community centre staff member commented that many youth successes and informal youth-supporting actions are not 'counted' by funders or schools because they cannot be measured or made to fit into a discrete timeframe. Examples include youth's power-in-relation knowledge practices of joking around together to release school stress or a parent and child quietly teaming up to negotiate barriers at school (root, trunk, branches/leaves, compost). Yet, the community acknowledges and celebrates members' informal, subtle, small-scale strengths and achievements.

PAR's horizontal storytelling supported participants to experience, recognise and value their already existing participatory, shared power. During storytelling, participants often had a palpable 'taste' of inclusive relational power being (re)membered and grown in the moment. One member exclaimed, 'Can you feel it too?' referring to the shared energy being created in the room, and others responded, 'Yes!' During another story, multiple members excitedly blurted out, 'I was there too!', 'Yeah, I remember that' (while smiling/laughing) and 'Me too!' These spontaneous exchanges expanded members' shared community experience igniting greater co-created community power.

Power-in-relation knowledge practices invite a 'rethinking of democracy as a mode of social organisation ... providing recognition due to all human agents' (Couldry 2010, p. 69). Shared power reflects an 'ecology of knowledges', whereby the 'concrete outcomes intended or achieved by different knowledge practices' (Couldry 2010, p. 15) give 'preference' to 'knowledge that guarantees the greatest level of participation to the social groups' (de Sousa Santos 2007, p. 16). Yet, community members sometimes distance themselves from energising knowledge practices for fear of being targeted, wrongly accused and/or reported by neighbours or community centre staff. Therefore, knowledge practices rooted in mutual power are crucial amidst neo-liberal government surveillance tactics of monitoring families on social income support (Aber & Nieto 2000). Such knowledge practices must be rooted in the community. While educational practices can benefit youth and their communities, residents' stories show that community power is not grown via educational or professional practices that are one-way, inequitable, authoritarian, judgmental and/or binary relationships and thus add further layers of inequity to community members' lives. In contrast, community members' power-in-relation

knowledge practices provide fuel to cope with and/or ignite energy to resist social–educational injustices, such as surveillance, poverty, discrimination and low academic expectations. These knowledge practices are often hard won given the pressures to become more individualistic, rather than community minded, in the context of a neo-liberal, competitive marketplace and increasing government surveillance of social housing communities.

Discussion

As a community–university PAR team, we engaged in horizontal dialogue, storytelling, metaphorical interpretations (i.e. the tree), the arts (i.e. the mural) and strengths-based perspectives. Through these approaches, the team explored, represented and shared a social housing community’s energising and inspiring knowledge practices and canopy of knowing, particularly focused on their support of youth school success. The team sought to reflect knowledge democracy’s aims of ‘intentionally linking values of justice, fairness and action to the process of [creating and] using knowledge’ (Hall & Tandon 2017, p. 13). Knowledge democracy is vital to the school success of youth living in social housing communities. Educational institutions fault low-income communities for their youth’s school struggles. Research conducted *on* marginalised communities using theories and concepts that frame them (and their lives) in terms of lack, deficit or need fuel and perpetuate such blame.

Our democratic community–university partnership resisted the cognitive injustice of deficit discourse by opening restorative possibilities for a low-income community to gather, narrate and explore their knowledge practices. Our research revealed that *who* is considered a valued and legitimate ‘knower’ of how to support youths’ high school success needs expansion; simultaneously, equitable distribution of that knowing is vital in order to contest and (re)configure existing educational hierarchies of knowledge. This transformation involves low-income communities exuding proud, vocal ownership of their knowledge practices and strengths, while schools and universities justly acknowledge low-income communities’ significant, life-giving knowledge contributions to their youth’s success. Our work participates in such necessary change.

The power of inclusive, democratic participatory research nurtured by storytelling, ecological metaphor, strengths and the arts is generative. In their pluriverse of sensitivities to multiple (and emergent) ways of knowing and engagement, these methods highlighted, expanded and galvanised abundance in community members and the PAR team, particularly in relation to supporting youth school success. The research contains community stories, knowings, identities, connections, experiences, expressions and possibilities that are life supporting and life giving. This abundance energises community members’ support of youth success in school amidst the structural, material and epistemological injustices that they face. Through these life-giving capacities, the team embodied and enacted PAR research’s commitment to social justice action, democratic change and knowledge democracy’s assertion that ‘knowledge is a powerful tool for taking action’ (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 13).

Our representations of the tree and canopy narratives highlight the life-giving merit of the community’s ways of knowing. The wall-sized mural of the *Community Tree of Knowledge and Engagement* in the community centre (see Figure 1) visualises the community’s diverse and intergenerational power, strength, beauty and knowledge. The funny, poignant youth performance of community members’ knowledge practices during the community’s annual Christmas dinner was an arts-based community experience of sharing, celebrating and gratitude giving, which reflected and expanded collective knowledge. The community

pamphlet, skit and publication will ignite diverse and broad dissemination of the community's knowledge practices. The creation of the pamphlet, mural and skit engage community members in accessible ways via local knowledge and the arts. The present academic journal article speaks to academics, educators and community workers seeking to work in democratic partnership with local communities. Via whatever means audiences learn about our research, the tree has practical implications. Our PAR team encourages low-income communities and their allies to make time for storytelling as our research demonstrates its transformational power. Storytelling emphasizes the value of taking the time to gather together as community members. Our PAR team invites our multiple audiences – academics, practitioners, community members – to find their own ways of sharing stories, for example, with groups of varying demographic configurations and via different media, including analog and digital forms – and to explore their own models and metaphors. The tree is a suggestion, an inspiration, a metaphor, which our team invites other communities to reconfigure for their own contexts and stories.

By using metaphor to demonstrate how community knowledge is akin to a tree's ecosystem (e.g. roots, trunk), the team conveyed members' knowledge practices as a living, interconnected whole. This concerted indwelling with trees enlivened the research via expansion of curiosity, playfulness, meaning-making and resonance. Team members' collective energy became particularly animated when talking through the 'languages of trees'. 'Taking in' the tree mural at the community centre ignited members' conversations, wonder and response.

The tree narrative and mural deepened connection to the power and wisdom of the community's energising knowledge practices. Recognition grew within the PAR team and the community that members are invaluable, everyday educational knowers and leaders because of their vital and ongoing youth-supporting knowledge practices. Community knowledge practices grounded and inspired youth, supported them through tough school days and taught them what truly makes a positive difference in life (such as, being true to myself and putting my best foot forward, and being there for each other). To embody knowledge democracy, communities, high schools and universities need to accord recognition, merit and influence to community-based knowledge practices. Educators and communities need to position communities' energising knowledge practices as indispensable educational knowing and leadership in supporting youth's school success. In situating knowledge practices within the interwoven three-part canopy (of lived, interconnected and participatory/power-in-relation knowings), a further critical and diverse knowledge reckoning occurs. These ways of knowing reflect a life-giving ontology that germinate and energise youth-supporting knowledge practices in one social housing community. In contrast to neo-liberal Western hierarchies of knowledge in Canadian high schools, which prioritise knowledges of competition, rationality, specialisation, individualism, efficiency, outcomes and standardisation, community members embody and share transformative educational narratives, through which schools and universities can better support democracy and social justice in education.

Concluding remarks

In communicating the study's findings, especially the use of the tree metaphor and quotes from community stories, we, the authors, drew from the community's and PAR team's ways of knowing and expression. We did so to give them recognition and to allow readers to experience the community's energising impacts, further encouraging a knowledge reckoning within academic journals themselves. Conventional knowledge shared in scholarship (e.g. instrumental, logical-linear, expert, or evidence and outcomes-based) does not best facilitate

dissemination of the knowledge democracy that our study's process and findings show is important. How to best communicate the study's findings emerged through the knowledge reckoning itself, specifically via the team's ongoing sensitivities to listening, language, power, dialogue and respect for community members' voices, the PAR approach and the team processes. As previously mentioned, social housing residents' voices, stories and strengths have been marginalised and not given 'just' recognition by schools, scholars and/or community members themselves.

Community members' knowledge practices were the most significant research 'outcome' of the study because of their power, energy and transformative potential. The team's identification of knowledge practices ignited the creation of the tree, wall-sized mural, youth skit and pamphlet for the neighbourhood. These representations/disseminations occurred because the research was guided by the energy that the knowledge practices held for the team and the community. By continuing to engage in PAR's positioning of the community members as knowers, experts and change agents after the research, community centre staff members used the knowledge practices to inform the centre's strategic planning. Youth embraced a leadership role, wanting to present the findings to their high school; meanwhile, staff spoke of inviting school personnel to come and see 'what is happening' in the community and to get to 'know them better', and a community member offered to carve a wooden sign with the tree image for the community centre. Community members continue to organically grow their community power by acknowledging and celebrating their valuable knowledge practices. In turn, community members are relaying the importance of knowledge democracy in the context of supporting youth school success. As one member exclaimed, 'We can show what we offer ... what we do ... we're an important player'. Research protocols guided by predetermined deliverables would have quelled members' and the team's energy around emergent knowing and expression. PAR ignited and transformed community knowing.

Our PAR team hopes that readers become curious to learn from the community's wisdom and lived experiences as shared via our tree and canopy narratives. What might these knowledge practices mean for your community-university research partnerships and community-school relationships? How might our exploration of knowledge practices help you challenge neo-liberal educational practices that are not life supporting? How might such research, in turn, promote the high school success of socially/economically marginalised youth?

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