Appendix B

Methodology

This appendix provides detailed information about the methodology used for the Study Circles Best Practices study.

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) commissioned the Best Practices study as an early stage, discovery-oriented inquiry aimed, in part, at the following questions:

1. How do study circle organizers make decisions and carry out strategies to produce effective rounds of community-wide study circles, particularly on race?

2. What are the absolute essentials — the practices organizers must use in order to produce study circles?

3. How effective are study circles in addressing issues related to race?

A. Developing the research framework

1. The research team

The Topsfield Foundation, Inc. (TFI) engaged Roberts & Kay, Inc. (RKI), a Lexington, Kentucky-based firm committed to advancing democratic practices in workplaces and communities, to conduct the Best Practices study. RKI constructed a research team that consisted of the two RKI principals, Rona Roberts and Steve Kay; Biren "Ratnesh" Nagda, assistant professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Washington; and Vivian Elliott, principal, Elliott Service Systems, Inc., Denver, Colorado. Rona Roberts served as project manager.

See Appendix A for more information about the team.

2. The research questions

The Best Practices team worked with TFI and SCRC to identify and refine a set of research questions to guide the inquiry. These questions are clearly qualitative, exploratory questions, appropriate to the first stage of an investigation that is intended to generate some benchmarks useful for future research:

1. What are the most effective practices for creating a broad-based, diverse organizing coalition? Specifically, what are the most effective practices for creating a coalition that is racially and ethnically diverse?

2. What are the most promising practices for recruiting a diverse group of facilitators? What are the most effective practices for training and supporting facilitators so that they can do their work effectively?

3. What are the most promising practices for recruiting participants from all parts of the community? What strategies are most promising for recruiting for racial and ethnic diversity? What program elements besides recruitment strategies (such as the issue

being considered, the up-front connection to change and action) are most important in recruiting for racial diversity?

4. What changes, outcomes, and results do organizers, facilitators, and participants ascribe to the study circle efforts in their communities? If on racism and race relations, what is the range of outcomes? If on another issue, how do the outcomes take into account the racial divisions and dynamics of the community?

5. What strategies, methods, or tactics do study circle organizers use to link study circles with community change efforts, and which are most effective? Specifically, how are programs linking to individual, collective, and institutional change initiatives on the issues of racism and race relations?

6. To what extent do organizers and participants consider study circles an effective tool for addressing racism?

7. What impact does topic have on (a) study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism, and (b) participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds?

The team worked with a draft of research questions during its first round of seven site visits. Then, with guidance from SCRC and the program officer at the Mott Foundation, the questions were further refined and clarified to their final formulation. See Appendix D for the different sets of research questions, as well as the interview questions the team used. Of the seven questions, Research Questions 1, 2, 3, and 5 are clearly aimed at the discovery and identification of best practices. Research Question 4 calls for an identification and presentation of outcomes and results from study circles. Research Questions 6 and 7 represent the first stage in an assessment of the appropriateness of study circles as a tool for community work on race, particularly in addressing racism.

3. The 17 learning sites

The Best Practices team worked with members of the Community Assistance team at SCRC to identify arenas of excellence in community-wide study circle programs. Together, SCRC staff and the Best Practices team developed a list of criteria, presented below. The Community Assistance team recommended an array of communities that, taken together, could offer the Best Practices team excellent opportunities to see particular aspects of study circle practices in action, and to learn from those who had developed the practices. The Community Assistance team believed that each individual learning site had demonstrated excellence in one or more of the program areas reflected in these criteria. Here are the criteria, presented in no particular order:

a. Coalition building

The core group of people committed to producing the entire study circle effort broadly reflected the community's diversity, and involved people who represented many different kinds of leadership, including those who increased the effort's visibility and made it attractive to participate; those who assembled and allocated resources to the effort; those who brought organizing skills to the many logistical challenges of study circles; and those who attracted typically hard-to-reach groups, including, in most communities, young people, senior citizens, low-income people, and people of color.

b. Diversity in recruitment or participation

The study circle organizers used effective strategies to ensure significant diversity in the study circles themselves.

c. Involvement of community leaders

Visible community leaders appeared among the key organizers, the coalition, the facilitator group (where appropriate), or the participant group. "Leaders" in this case includes elected officials, but is not limited to them.

d. Recruiting

The study circle effort demonstrated particular creativity and success in the recruiting phase of organizing study circles.

e. Action council or task force

At the end of the study circle sessions, organizers in the community did an effective job of establishing task forces or work groups committed to specific future action.

f. Policy impact

The study circle effort has resulted in changes in public policy either through local or state legislation or regulatory change.

g. Ties to governance

The study circle effort involved citizens directly in improving their governance, or built stronger, more participatory governance structures.

h. Ties to action

The study circle effort led to valued, significant action in communities or states.

i. Other outcomes

The study circle effort produced significant or worthy results not accounted for in other categories.

j. Permanent institutional home

The study circle effort has begun developing a permanent organizational base, and a way to sustain it.

Using these criteria, the SCRC Community Assistance team recommended 17 localities (communities and states) as good learning sites for the Best Practices study, and the Best Practices Team accepted the recommendations. Here are those 17 learning sites:

- Alread, Arkansas
- Aurora, Illinois
- Colorado Springs, Colorado
- Decatur, Georgia
- Fayetteville, North Carolina
- Ft. Myers, Florida
- Hartford, Connecticut
- Inglewood, California
- Lima, Ohio
- Maine
- New Castle County, Delaware
- North Little Rock, Arkansas
- Oklahoma
- Springfield, Illinois
- Syracuse, New York
- Twin Cities, Minnesota
- Woodridge, Illinois

B. Primary research methods

Best Practices team members conducted the inquiry in each community using multiple research approaches. The fundamental research philosophy involved learning with the community partners. This meant that it was important to build working relationships in each community and to share information and ask for feedback, correction, and improvements at several points during the project.

A member of the Best Practices team visited each of the learning sites at least once; four of the sites received two visits. Thirteen of the sites received a visit by one researcher working alone. Four of the sites received visits by a team of two researchers; in each of these cases, the two researchers represented both a gender mix and a combination of a European American/white person and a person of color. All four researchers visited one of the sites together, and three of the four researchers visited one site together. Site visits ranged in length from one to four days, with one and a half to two days being the norm.

Researchers worked with coordinators in each site in advance of the visits. Typically, coordinators arranged for researchers to spend time with the greatest possible number of organizers and coalition members, some study circle participants, key supporters of study circles, and, in some places, study circle facilitators. Each visit varied in terms of structure, depending on the context in the community, the coordinators' time availability, and the availability of desired participants in the study. All told, researchers met with 290 people in the 17 learning sites. Appendix C presents demographic information from each site visit.

In each learning site, researchers used multiple methods of inquiry, including the following:

1. Written materials

Researchers read about each learning site both before and after each visit. Before each site visit, researchers read SCRC file materials about that learning site. These included materials forwarded by coordinators, internal SCRC notes about telephone conversations, and, in several cases, copies of written publicity and descriptions of other forms of media attention the programs had received.

Following each visit, researchers usually read additional information collected during the visit. These materials included recent program descriptions; grant applications; promotional materials; clippings from newspapers or other print media; records, minutes, or financial reports from study circle organizations' meetings; decisions; products of coalitions, action groups, or study circle participants; and, in a few cases, written reports about the study circle program.

2. Observation

In several learning sites, researchers observed some aspect of the study circle program or organization at work. These opportunities included sitting in on an action group meeting; observing an all-day meeting about celebrating past accomplishments and planning future work; observing a leadership training program that was sponsored, in part, by a study circle initiative; and observing a facilitator coaching/debriefing session.

3. Individual interviews

Researchers interviewed about a third of the research participants individually. Particularly in the earliest site visits, the individual interview constituted the most widely used investigative approach. Researchers followed a semistructured guide organized according to key themes. The guide included frequent probes and questions aimed at determining potential new directions for the conversations based on the interviewee's knowledge, experiences, and interests. With participants' permission, researchers made a written record of the interview. Most were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Researchers recorded several interviews by entering nearly verbatim text into a personal computer during the interview. Researchers took handwritten notes on a few interviews.

4. Small group interviews

Whenever it made sense to the people being interviewed, researchers talked with two or more people at the same time, using the same thematic guide that framed the individual interviews. Researchers tape-recorded all group interviews and had them transcribed.

5. Focus groups

The researchers conducted, recorded, and produced transcripts from 11 focus groups. Five were constructed through purposive sampling, and six were constructed with moderate degrees of random selection from stratified lists provided by the study circle coordinators in Syracuse and Hartford.

<u>Purposive sampling — targeting people who have the information and persuading them to participate:</u>

Aurora facilitators
Alread organizers/facilitators (most focus group participants played at least these two roles)
Fayetteville participants
Maine organizers
Woodridge participants

Random sampling (to varying degrees) — using tables of random numbers to draw a reflective sample from an overall population:

Hartford organizers
Hartford participants of color
Hartford European American/white participants
Syracuse organizers
Syracuse participants of color
Syracuse European American/white participants

Researchers used a planned protocol of questions in each of these focus groups, with flexible opportunities for considering new information if participant interest warranted it. See Appendix D for the protocol on "interview questions."

Researchers chose the focus group approach particularly because of the value of being able to listen to a group of people who have shared a particular kind of study circle experience as they talk with each other about topics related to the research themes. In this way, members of the Best Practices team deepened their understanding and insights into how study circle participants and organizers made sense of their experiences.

The five focus groups constructed with purposive sampling — in Maine, Aurora, Fayetteville, Woodridge, and Alread — included a gender mix and a reflection of the diversity within the population from which the participants were drawn.

In order to attain some degree of homogeneity and promote an atmosphere of comfort and trust for considering difficult topics, the researchers constructed participant groups in Hartford and Syracuse that separated participants of color and European American/white participants and matched each group with a facilitator similar in racial/ethnic background. This structure built on an initial focus group study conducted in New Castle County, Delaware in 1997 that used a version of this racially homogenous approach for group construction. In both Syracuse and Hartford, researchers recruited organizer groups that included a heterogenous mix by gender, race, and ethnicity.

6. Community tours

In some learning sites, researchers themselves toured the communities in order to try to understand them better geographically. In others, coordinators or other study circle organizers provided a guided tour aimed at deepening researchers' understanding of the program's context.

7. Site visit summaries

After the first visit to each community, the researcher or pair of researchers wrote a short summary of findings and sent this in draft form to people who had been interviewed or who

had participated in focus groups. Researchers invited comment, correction, and suggestions, and received some form of response from about ten percent of the research participants.

8. Thick descriptions

Researchers prepared a detailed description of each learning site visited, using the research questions as the framework. These thick descriptions included quotations where available, drawn from verbatim computer notes or, in many later site visits, from verbatim transcripts of tape-recorded conversations. Each thick description typically included a timeline of key events and a guide to the key players. Researchers made early, tentative suggestions about possible best practices with regard to each of the major research questions.

Researchers used the thick descriptions for internal learning and did not share them with communities. As unpolished but richly descriptive documents, they formed the basis for initial work on cross-site comparisons, cross-site descriptions, interpretation, and analysis.

9. Site analysis charts

As one of the foundations for cross-site comparisons, researchers prepared charts showing abbreviated versions of conditions, decisions, and strategies in each community in terms of five major factors: background factors, organization factors, participation factors, facilitation factors, and action-change factors. Researchers mailed hard copies of the site analysis charts to program coordinators in each of the 17 learning sites and asked for corrections, updates, and improvements. Coordinators in 13 learning sites responded. Appendix E presents the full site analysis charts.

10. Shared draft

Four months before the project deadline, researchers sent a rough draft of a report aimed at practitioners to every person who had participated in any part of the inquiry in the 17 learning sites. Researchers asked for feedback, changes, suggestions, and improvements. About 15 or 20 of the recipients responded.

11. Advisory groups

In May, 2000 SCRC invited a group of ten study circle coordinators to read and comment on the first draft of the report for practitioners. The coordinators reflected a mix in terms of their own experience, the ages of their programs, and the topics their programs have addressed. Three of the participants in this group came from learning sites included in the Best Practices study. The group was mixed in terms of gender, race, and ethnic background.

This Practitioner Advisory focus group met for about 8.5 hours, giving detailed feedback and suggestions for improvement to the Best Practices team members present, and to much of the

SCRC staff. The Best Practices team members took careful notes and made major revisions to the practitioner report based on this invaluable session.

12. Completion

After seeking and receiving extensive feedback from many sources, the Best Practices team and RKI staff revised each document multiple times during the summer of 2000. Anyone profiled in the practitioner report received a printed copy of the relevant text and gave express permission for the team to include the statements in the report. The team formatted and printed this comprehensive report in final form, and submitted all other text (practitioner report, draft of brochure/summary, internal memo on observations or ideas not addressed in the report, and case studies) to SCRC and TFI on or before September 1, 2000.

Appendix A

Appendix C

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