United for Brownsville - a collective impact effort that takes a racial equity approach to improving the early childhood system for Black and brown children in Brownsville, New York - privileges the voices of the historically marginalized as the starting point for how to change the system. Instead of just “getting the system in the room” as collective impact often does, we started with the part of the system that often gets left out: community residents themselves. If we don’t start there, we will just replicate the same traumas and stresses that have been inflicted upon the community for generations.

What we and many other social change leaders have come to think of as the “tyranny of data” is just one example of a broader mental model about what constitutes expertise and who has it. Quantitative data often seems to be the main consideration for government agency officials who design solutions for communities with disparate outcomes without actually having community residents join them at the table. The glaring absence of those who are most directly affected by failing systems crowds out the wisdom found in their stories and in their local perspectives.
Because Brownsville is home to the largest concentration of public housing in the country, the media is full of negative narratives about the neighborhood, especially around outcomes for children. Residents are understandably concerned about the way in which they are portrayed and their ability to access affordable and high-quality services. So when we created United for Brownsville four years ago, we intentionally worked to transform power dynamics. Pretty quickly we found that required deep relational work.

It took us about six months to build relationships with the people who live in Brownsville and secure their support in identifying where and how to set targets for change in the early childhood system. We asked mothers, fathers, and grandparents about the inequities they saw in the neighborhood early childhood systems. We sought their visions for a neighborhood that better supported young children's development. Over time, this group of residents formalized as the Family Advisory Board. We also built relationships with government officials, local advocacy organizations, and non-profits.

A key lesson we learned during this phase of our work is that in order to live out our principles and commitments to participatory planning and racial equity, we had to slow down and focus on relationships.
In 2019, we brought mothers, fathers, and grandparents from Brownsville serving on the Family Advisory Board together with government officials and nonprofit leaders for a meeting in Lower Manhattan where the Child Welfare Agency in New York City is housed.

Brownsville residents told stories about their struggles to receive services from the very agencies seated at that table, including the Child Welfare Agency. They shared the helplessness and stress they were often made to feel as parents. One mother’s anguish touched us all as she recounted being brushed off by teachers and doctors when she raised her concerns about her son’s developmental days. “Don’t be so worried - he’ll probably grow out of it,” she was told over and over again.

Their stories opened the space for government agency representatives to share their own private struggles as parents of children with epilepsy and ADHD and other conditions. They talked about their feelings of failure and helplessness as they tried to wrangle services out of the very agencies they worked for.

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That moment has always stuck with me. All of us in the conference room that day experienced a powerful moment of connection between parents who are not normally in the same spaces together. People cried as they listened to the stories of deputy commissioners, and deputy commissioners offered hugs to parents wronged by their agencies.

That powerful moment of connection revealed the commonality between everyone in the system, including those in positions of power.

David Harrington, United for Brownsville
Deep relational work is what holds the potential to transform systems. We first build relationships where power is shared and we make investments to support the leadership of people who personally experience the problems that result from broken systems. The creativity and commitment that flows from investing in people and in relationships is the foundation for our work, and it has changed systems in Brownsville in measurable ways.

It set the stage for subsequent partnerships with other government agencies in New York City, such as the Bureau of Early Intervention, which is part of the Department of Health. It has enabled us to access data that had previously been inaccessible to us, which we could then plan and act around. And it has served as the foundation of a close collaboration that has led to demonstrable gains in closing inequity gaps for Black and brown children.

**Kassa Belay**, United for Brownsville