Semics

Mining for Meaning

Evaluating First 5 LA's CDI Program Through Qualitative Methodologies

By **Semics, LLC**
Grant Power, Managing Director
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Introduction

First 5 LA's **Community-Developed Initiatives** (CDI) provided funding to agencies that would design programs and projects to address the needs in their communities pertaining to young children and their families. It is one of two distinct "funding approaches" developed by First 5 LA in its second strategic plan, a concrete way of defining its role of partnering with communities to improve the well being and school readiness of children age 0-5. Goals included increasing resources, ensuring access to services and improving the ability of families, communities and providers to deliver effective services in the ecology of early child development. The concept was to invite good ideas from communities and fund those with the greatest potential.

Over three funding cycles, more than 700 potential grantees submitted *Letters of Intent*. Ultimately, First 5 LA funded 54 projects whose goals focused on one or more of these long-term outcomes: good health, safety and survival, economic well-being, social and emotional well-being, and school readiness. Each grantee was contractually required to measure outcomes at the program-level (or subcontract an external evaluator to do so). Their varied evaluation efforts produced a range of unique and valuable data sets on program-specific outcomes targeted at a discrete problem or goal. Initiative-wide evaluation of CDI-funded projects as a cohort would require qualitative data collection and analysis at the level of system building, that is, strengthening the service delivery mechanisms across the full spectrum of CDI agencies.

In September, 2003, First 5 LA contracted our community-based consulting firm, Semics LLC (Semics), to conduct the CDI initiative-wide evaluation, over a three-year period. Semics derives its approach to qualitative research from the social science concept "*emic,*" referring to the perspectives, experiences and interpretative frameworks of those living in the communities served by First 5 LA-funded programs.

Semics' task was to mine for meaning within the interactive layers of a dynamic, multi-site, multi-goal, funding initiative to produce credible, applicable findings that stakeholders and policy-makers alike would find useful.

This paper outlines Semics' theoretical approach to the qualitative research methodologies chosen for the CDI initiative-wide evaluation. It details how Site Immersion and the Learning Exchange created appropriate data streams, and venues for data collection, that helped clarify how the CDI-funded initiative strengthened service delivery and contributed to an increase in the well-being of children 0–5 and their families across LA County.

To illustrate the challenge of mining disparate sources for cohesive meaning we offer the old parable of *The Seven Blind Mice*. Each mouse scurries across a separate part of a strange, huge newcomer in their midst. Each insists she knows what *it* is, based only on her experience of a single part of the *something*. Their discordant views ("It's a rope! No, it's a snake! No, a fan. No, it's a cliff!") provoke friction among the mice. Not until the last mouse runs across the whole thing from top to bottom, side to side, and end to end does the truth emerge: "It's an elephant!" In doing so, the group discovered that "knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole." [1]

Semics began its task by defining the research question. How had First 5 LA's funding of 54 community developed initiatives improved the lives of Los Angeles county children and their families? We needed to evaluate to what extent positive changes in service delivery and system capacity were associated with improvements in the well being of children 0–5 and their families. It was also important to provide First 5 LA with a "big picture" account of their return on investment and bring to the fore broad-based lessons and best practices while respecting and acknowledging each CDI-funded project's unique attributes and operating environment.

By examining the experience of CDI grantees in all their diversity, our findings aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the effects of CDI-funded project activities, in general, on three critical outcomes: changes in the members of the targeted age cohort, changes in the organizations that service that population, and changes in the mechanisms and strategies designed to deliver those services.

With these substantive goals in mind, Semics designed and implemented two complementary evaluation methodologies: **Site Immersion (SI)** and the **CDI Learning Exchange (LE)**. Both emphasized dialogic, co-generative activities drawing on constructivist and ethnographic approaches to qualitative research. The Learning Exchange—a series of seven, grantee-driven gatherings—satisfied a core element of First 5 LA's strategic plan calling for a collaborative support system for a process of learning focused on the grantees. Drawing from the data streams these synergistic methodologies generated, Semics then produced detailed "Narratives of Change" on approximately 40 of the 54 CDI grantees, in the form of site reports that inform understanding of the overarching impact of the CDI initiative.

The “Thinking” Behind the Methodology

Modern society has socialized us to value knowledge that is derived from science. The need for objectivity is critical to scientific advancement and the generation of credible empirical evidence. Measurement of complex phenomena allows us to show in statistical form specific changes taking place regarding a particular line of inquiry and is used to justify social and physical capital investments. Quantitative data is less labor-intensive to collect and easier to synthesize. Yet, when the goal is to understand change processes or identify and replicate best practices on a larger scale, measurement data may “tell us only a very small part of the story or the wrong story altogether,” contends Srilatha Batliwala, a Civil Society Research Fellow at the Hauser Center for Non-profit Organizations at Harvard University.[2] She advises that “we examine our assumptions to determine when measurement may be meaningless or even detrimental to our understanding of how change happens.”

The CDI evaluation sought to elicit and facilitate various types of learning that could be derived from an open-ended solicitation approach to funding (contrasted with a Commission-driven initiative with a singular programmatic focus). Semics responded with methodologies designed to aid learning from direct experience with project implementation, in addition to finding appropriate ways to define and measure results. The initiative-wide evaluation mandate required exploration of the role CDI funding plays as a social catalyst in the community. Semics designed activities to evaluate processes and demonstrate changing levels of empowerment and capacity at the systems level.

Although we were tempted simply to construct measurable benchmarks, we found that teasing out the uncountable impact of CDI funding on community systems, providers, services, and participants was more appropriate. The richness of the data we collected on grantees, and concomitant findings regarding CDI as a whole, could have been lost had we attempted to translate or reduce our findings solely or primarily to statistical measures.

Semics’ framework for the CDI initiative-wide evaluation represents a counter effort to the fragmentation that metrics can often produce. We emphasized plurality and listened to a multiplicity of voices, but our paramount endeavor was to discover and show as **one whole**, things that are not really separate.

Moving Past Issues of Validity

We acknowledge that issues of validation and reliability accompany qualitative research studies and for some readers, these concerns may call such a methodology into question. Concerns over validity come from a positivist, scientific tradition and serve an important regulatory purpose in that arena. The assumption is that if there is validity and reliability then the study results can be replicated. However, the situations on which Semics reported were unique from moment to moment. There was no average CDI grantee, no typical evaluators on Semics' staff, nor one representative CDI-funded program. Even when working as a group at Learning Exchange gatherings, the experience for each grantee remained unique, dependent on his/her own history and beliefs.

Reflective, qualitative research findings therefore cannot be replicated and efforts at validation through an objective lens produce only frustration. Guba and Lincoln suggest that alternative criteria such as "credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity." [3]

Newman offers the openly subjective notion of "resonance," and suggests testing the findings with this rubric: Does the account offer thick description ("enough for me to 'live' in the situation, to see it in some depth")?[4] Does it clarify the debates that influenced the findings? Do the researchers make explicit their assumptions and reflect on them? Does the research offer analysis on what it all means, in essence, addressing the question, "So what?"

Through Site Immersion and activities in Learning Exchange gatherings, Semics returned to the grantees, again and again, to verify— rather than validate — that what we had captured was authentic, important and useful. Our findings reflect a mixture of subjective, caring involvement in the work of the grantees and a commitment to be appropriately observant, analytical and reflexive.

Site Immersion as a Methodology

In constructivist evaluation, "constructions entertained by the several involved individuals and stakeholders are first uncovered and plumbed for meaning," according to Guba and Lincoln. "Then they are confronted, compared, and contrasted in encounter situations. The constructivist approach is a diffuse, labor intensive process that often requires evaluators to assume multiple, at times, conflicting roles" (observer, advocate, educator). Yet, they assert, "It is the best way to evolve viable and acceptable solutions to claims, concerns, and issues widely felt, and to formulate constructions widely seen to fit, demonstrate relevance, and exhibit continuing modifiability. It is one of the more realistic and socially sensitive approaches to performing useful — and utilized — evaluation. [5]

The task of evaluating CDI across the entire initiative did not require finding of some bank of passive knowledge nor simply assembling variant beliefs. Semics' task required that we create open spaces through which data could flow, be constructed, reconstructed, and pursued. We anchored our approach in the two non-linear phases of constructivist evaluation that Guba and Lincoln postulate: *discovery* and *assimilation*. During discovery, the researcher describes what is going on at the grantee site level. In the assimilation phase, she incorporates new discoveries into the existing constructions. When new data conflicts with prior constructions, the researcher updates or replaces them with the more informed construction so she operates from constructions that most closely fit the real context. Remaining open to change and modifying constructions with emergent data enables constructivist researchers to better define, address, and present the core issues under study.

Reflexivity—how the researcher influences the social world being investigated—is central to the interacting, dialogic process at every step in community-focused research. The dialogic framework fosters creation of synergistic communication, making an intrinsic investment in the reflexivity of all conversants (researcher, grantee, and program/service recipient in our study).

Hatch reminds us that the concept of the researcher as an objective, unbiased observer has been supplanted by an enactive role that acknowledges the researcher's participation and co-authorship of research outcomes. [6] Contemporary social science recognizes that qualitative researchers *do* influence the direction of their work. Rather than seeing this as a liability to guard against, experts in the field of evaluative research suggest that reflexivity can be an asset, a means to expand understanding. Batiste suggests that "when our partiality... is understood as an integral aspect of our methodology and data, the research and the researcher begin to share a mutually supportive relationship."[7] This dynamic fueled the many mutually supportive, productive relationships that developed between Semics' evaluation staff and CDI grantees over the three-year evaluation.

When the role of the qualitative researcher requires total immersion in the experience, Janesick posits that it is helpful for researchers to employ all their senses, including the "sixth sense." Researchers who sharpen their intuitive skills can open up previously unknown or hidden avenues of data by following through on intuitive hunches that emerge through observation and interviews. Profound connecting with participants helps to establish trust. "This, in turn, allows for greater access to sources and ensures an involvement on the part of the participants that enables them to tell their respective stories."[8]

Semics' evaluation framework found resonance with the Hamburg approach to qualitative heuristic methodology which optimizes the explorative potential of the material with the aim of discovering patterns and similarities. Kleining and Herald cite four rules to this approach: [9]

Rule 1: **Openness of the researcher**
(to new concepts and correction if data are inconsistent with prior constructions.)

Rule 2: **Openness of the research topic**
(which may change during the process, follow the story!)

Rule 3: **Maximum variation of perspectives**
(gather multiple viewpoints, vary methods, respondents, time, situation, researchers.)

Rule 4: **Discovery of similarities and integration of all data**
(no data is excluded, focus on unearthing similar patterns and structures across all the data.)

Lastly, we are mindful that sound qualitative research must offer readers and stakeholders the means to verify the trustworthiness and credibility of the constructed outcomes. To this end, we have maintained transparency in our research decisions involving Site Immersion and Learning Exchange, and at every level, explicitly reported on our processes and how we achieved what we did.

Site Immersion "By Design"

Ethnography, one of the oldest forms of qualitative social science research "seeks to explain both explicit aspects of a culture — what all members are aware of and take for granted — and tacit elements outside of awareness, Hodgson explains." [10] Ethnographic study means learning from people rather than studying them, with the knowledge gained intended to inform rather than control. The ethnographic approach does not attempt to discover factors of probability, but rather to shed light on what is possible or plausible. By collecting as many different kinds of data as possible, and analyzing it in totality, ethnographic research illuminates patterns, structures and functions at work. From the totality of this data, we derive a deeper, more textured understanding of the contextual conditions and realities that contribute to positive outcomes for children, their families, and the agencies serving their needs.

For CDI, Semics oriented six Evaluation Associates (EAs) in the principles of ethnographic research. Several EAs came from non-profit and community development backgrounds and some had prior process documentation experience, but none had conducted formal ethnographic research. Their assignment was to immerse themselves fully in the grantee's environment for an extended period — watching, listening, asking questions, capturing data, and recording their observations. Each EA was assigned a caseload of approximately nine grantees with the aim of making 12-30 visits to each site in their respective caseloads over a three-year period.

Although no strict protocol confined their inquiry, Semics designed a Progressive Depth Matrix (PDM) to guide construction of observers' questions with the aim of progressively deepening their understanding of the interactive variables operating at the site level. The PDM helped the EAs identify important threads from prior site observations that merited follow-up in subsequent meetings.

They were trained to keep their antennae attuned to behavior, knowledge, and artifacts, paying close attention to discovering and collecting data regarding inter-relationships, community engagement, and culturally sensitive outreach practices. While their interactions on-site encouraged co-generative dialogue with grantees, the EAs also elicited feedback using occasional survey tools, including Organizational Mapping, a Logic Model, and Participant Feedback questionnaires.

Semics primed the EAs to flesh out grantees' perception and definitions of the need(s) they were addressing, how their intervention design made sense as a strategic response to the need(s) and related underlying problems, and how effectively they were implementing the intervention according to the need(s) outlined in the project's scope of work. We also sought to understand how these items — the grantees' definition of the critical need or problem, the intervention's design, and the implementation process — changed, if at all, over the three-year life of the project. It was critical to find out how any of these changes improved the project's capacity to achieve outcomes that addressed the needs identified in the original project proposal.

Some EAs found opportunities to organize group interviews, take photographs, and videotape proceedings, when appropriate and after securing all permissions. For example, Semics evaluation supervisors organized one focus group of grantees to probe for understanding of the difference collaboration makes.

In the process of data collection through Site Immersion, the researcher becomes a refined research tool. Hammersley and Atkinson assert that subjects' reactions to the presence of the researcher, and the researcher's response to the context, are as valuable as any other aspect of the study. Bias and subjectivity are factors to consider, but immersion by the researcher allows a richer vein of data to be mined.[11]

Over time, Semics EAs formed relationships of trust with grantee directors, coordinators and staff that revealed deeper layers of information. They operated with an unusually high degree of autonomy in what they chose to observe, collect and record because the evaluation framework both assumed and appreciated the role of subjectivity.

Site Immersion "On the Ground"

Tasked with field observation, note-taking, co-generative interviewing, report writing, peer-debriefing, and triangulation, Semics EAs embraced their assignments. They initiated contact with grantee coordinators and directors in their caseload to arrange first meetings which they conducted in research pairs. They used the first meetings to introduce Semics, explain Site Immersion and distinguish the concept of initiative-wide evaluation from the site/program-specific evaluation that each grantee needed to obtain.

Initial confusion arose when grantee staff at some sites thought Semics EAs were representing First 5 LA—the funder—or were there to monitor grant compliance. Due to staggered start-ups and a glitch in the communications chain, many grantees had not been fully briefed by First 5 LA on Semics' role and were resistant to the EAs initial overtures. But over time, as First 5 LA clarified Semics' purpose, describing the research as a grantee-oriented evaluation of 54 CDI-funded agencies, the grantees' reluctance dissipated and the process began in earnest.

Observation activities during the first year could be characterized as a social investigation phase. Observers focused on organizational and relational mapping—from detail to big picture, from site level to First 5 LA. They spent time getting to know staff and participants, allowing their periodic presence to become commonplace.

Later, Semics EAs adapted to the knowledge they had gleaned by modifying the evaluation questions for CDI in consultation with First 5 LA. During the CDI evaluation's first year, questions addressed to CDI grantees sought to understand in broad terms, initial changes occurring in grantee agencies, their delivery of services and outreach strategies. Taking stock of first-year findings, Semics' management team realized its original evaluation questions could now sharpen the focus on specific changes identified as key to CDI as an initiative. For example, open-ended questions about changes in funded organizations designed to collect data on the impact CDI was making in the service delivery system prompted a new range of related questions to emerge for the second year.

Thus Semics looked more closely at specific ways organizations were transforming their internal systems or improving their overall function (e.g., fiscal and human resource administration, renovation or expansion of physical operating space, technology improvements, systematically implementing and using evaluation to improve program performance.) In addition, Semics developed new questions and data collection instruments regarding system improvement, addressing changes that involved more than one agency at a time. Important aspects of this process in CDI included collaboration, integration of services, network development across grantees, and information sharing.

Throughout the second year, Semics evaluation staff were encouraged to engage in an open-ended dialog with the data they had collected in *year one* while collecting new data to deepen their analysis of CDI-funded programs. In other words, their questioning would move them to a deeper level of observation based on their prior findings. They were directed to identify, document and characterize new changes in the grantees' organizations, in their service delivery mechanisms, and structure or collaboration with other providers — all in relation to implementation of their CDI projects. We sought to deepen our collective understanding of how these varied changes contributed to, or perhaps, impeded, the system building aspect of CDI.

During year three, EAs turned their focus toward program staff and participants, seeking participant-reported outcomes and cumulative results. They conducted up to five interviews at each site with parent participants about their direct experiences with outreach, access, and the perceived results or benefits of the grantee's service/program in relation to their needs.

Semics organized several focus groups, some thematic with varied grantees in attendance, others site-based with staff from that program discussing a broad range of issues. We also organized a series of special topic focus groups (e.g. health, early learning, child safety) emanating from Semics' discussions with clusters of grantees about challenges in the areas of technical assistance, design, and program delivery. Our objective was to mine for a deeper understanding of the factors that help grantees' become more successful in implementing effective interventions—and to document their struggles under the real-life conditions of their target communities.

Influence of the Progressive Depth Matrix and Triangulation

Each site presented a unique dynamic that Semics EAs had to grasp. Some likened the challenge to "trying to catch a moving train." The complex, layered dialog going on at the site level took time to penetrate. Without the benefit of professional training as ethnographic observers, many EAs faced a steep learning curve. At first, they felt somewhat uncomfortable without pre-defined objectives and tools to administer. The open-ended, interactive nature of the inquiry stretched their ability to conceive and follow a line of questioning. The PDM, designed to aid them in this aspect, fell short in the view of some of the novice EAs in terms of its applicability to the real situations they were encountering. In some instances, it took a few months for EAs to "get up to speed," but with each site visit, they sharpened their observational acuity, deepening their understanding of the dialog and their ability to join in it.

"When I visit a grantee," one EA commented, "what I come away with is my understanding of that grantee's program—*today*. I know I need to verify my observations in my interviews with them next month. Each site has its own flow. What I think I know can't be known in one visit, so on the next visit I cross-check my prior observations as well as pursuing something new."

Monitoring Subjectivity

Semics EAs made a practice of triangulating their observations through a team-based approach to ensure that site visit reporting did not include "figments of the evaluator's imagination," as Guba and Lincoln caution. They sought out multiple, diverse perspectives to verify the acuity of their insights. When conducting site visits in pairs, the EAs cross-checked their perceptions of the day's activities during the car rides back to Semics' offices. When EAs noted an unsettling undercurrent at a site or were stymied by an impasse, they requested another team member visit the site with a fresh pair of eyes to clarify what they had perceived. In one instance, three EAs making separate, sequential visits to the same site were able to document through observation and interview the extraordinary difficulty this particular grantee was having in achieving its anticipated goals, as well as the underlying reasons why this was happening.

Influence of Timing, Persistence, and Trust

One EA, doing SI at a grantee site providing services to NICU babies and their parents, initially encountered a closed culture due to the HIPPA-sensitive hospital environment. The EA's request to observe intensive training sessions for medical staff was turned down. However, her low-key persistence and presence contributed to trust building with the grantee. "Because I made the point of visiting, physically, once a month, they began to allow me to observe staff meetings. So by being there, creating familiarity and building rapport, doors started to open."

Semics EAs operated on two levels at once—pursuing facts while at the same time responding with a kind of intuitive action, mindful of the complex interplay of factors that account for a project's outcomes. For example, they didn't hesitate to respond to unexpected opportunities to collect data. When one grantee told the EA that their program-specific evaluator wasn't collecting the qualitative data they needed — only quantitative pre- and post-intervention benchmarks — she offered to help. "I saw that I could address our data collection needs and theirs at the same time. So they agreed to let me conduct phone surveys with parent participants from two years ago and staff doctors and nurses, and I was allowed to observe three parent support groups. Timing is everything. I filled a need for them and in the process got the data that Semics needed."

Researchers' Strengths and Biases

Semics EAs brought solid people skills to the assignment, strengthened by commonalities of language, culture, and years of community development experience. They were informed by, and respectful of, each grantee's unique setting and thought of their presence as both a means and an end in which research unfolded through collaborative partnerships and inter-relationships. At the same time, doing the research activity itself helped EAs build deeper ties with people at the sites. Creating the conditions for interactive inquiry in this light opened up spaces for rich interaction.

The EAs had to make good use of common sense, mature judgment, and self-awareness. Sometimes they had to improvise and accept that control didn't reside with the evaluator all the time. Many had to adjust their thinking and recalibrate how they approached the grantee when they encountered organizational resistance or inertia that thwarted their data collection efforts.

Some grantees did not respond in a timely manner to EA efforts to schedule site visits. Sometimes it took numerous phone calls and emails before an EA could schedule a single visit. If the grantee representative they had arranged to interview that day couldn't keep the commitment, the EA stayed on site and found other people to interview and activities to observe.

No evaluator starts an evaluation project as a *tabula rasa*, free of preconceptions. With this awareness, Semics EAs were expected and encouraged to actively examine their personal assumptions throughout their SI assignment. Their self-reflection on how their beliefs might influence their observations, coupled with their commitment to capturing authentic voices, strengthened diligence in monitoring possible effects of bias.

For example, one bilingual EA immersed herself in a grantee site offering training to non-English speaking child care providers that prepared them to qualify for accreditation by the State of California. This project focused on school-readiness and emphasized how, as the young child's first teachers, parent and care providers can contribute to this goal. The EA observed that all the training sessions were translated into the participants' mother tongue and that none of the participants spoke English. She sensed a disconnect between method and goal. Bilingual ability had always been emphasized in this EA's upbringing and through personal experience she knew the connection between English competency and academic success.

"It was my bias and I thought I should put it out there, so I asked the grantee how these providers could be the child's first teacher when they don't yet speak English. They suggested I observe the role playing activities at the trainings. The trainers were showing the providers how to structure the children's day, about following routines and doing activities. I realized how the providers were preparing the kids for school simply by getting them used to a pre-school-type schedule and environment. So even though the children were not hearing English from the providers, they were being readied for pre- school by learning how they were supposed to behave when they got to the real school setting."

Some EAs arrived on site with preconceived ideas about the grantee's capacity and cultural sensitivity. "I had heard that this grantee didn't really know their community," one EA recounted. "But, there had been a staff turn-over. After a few months of immersion, I saw that they really did know the community and were making more effort to better understand the needs of their target population."

Another EA, anticipating an evasive reaction from one grantee director with a penchant for brevity, arrived on-site intent on conducting a curtly structured interview. She found the director eager to share in a dialogic exchange and quickly adjusted her approach. Over two years of site visits, the EA's relationship with the director deepened in trust and yielded a substantial data stream that we used to create a thick narrative of change for that site.

One of the 54 CDI grantees was a large institution offering multiple services and programs. They already had the benefit of mature infrastructure, a vast array of community connections and a supportive funding network. The EA assigned to immerse in this grantee's CDI-funded project arrived with a preconception that this intervention was redundant, simply replicating bureaucracy that other institutions had created.

"At first I held onto my bias, convinced that the political stature of their principal investigator was what won them the grant. I wrote about my bias in my initial site visit report. But, in the ensuing visits, as I immersed myself deeper, I made discoveries about the value of collaboration, and observed firsthand how this project came up with innovative systems changes in mental health services."

The EA's bias in this instance was perceptible, but not blinding. In fact, by making her bias transparent to herself and the evaluation team, she sharpened her attention. The extended nature of Site Immersion and the relationships she developed over time with on-site staff had the effect of eroding her bias, allowing her to document the authentic changes unfolding at the site through observation and dialogue.

Influence of Confidentiality and Leadership on Access

Concern over confidentiality presented a challenge at some grantee sites. One EA, immersed in a hospital-based program providing home visitation to premature babies, knew it wasn't appropriate for him to be present in the medically and emotionally sensitive home environment but he used ingenuity and technology to supplement his data collection efforts. "I got permission to email some of the parents and several of them did respond to the brief set of questions I outlined." Another grantee providing services to survivors of domestic violence was extremely constrained by confidentiality concerns and never permitted access to any Semics EA despite repeated attempts.

EAs found that leadership affected access and data collection at grantee sites even more than issues of confidentiality. "If it was easy to build a bridge in, it had to do with who was in charge. The organization takes on that person's personality. If the leader was secretive, or resistant to CDI evaluation, then their organization was that way, too, and we would have a hard time building rapport," observed one EA. On the other hand, grantee programs whose leaders were open, adaptable, and perceived real benefit in the CDI evaluation fostered broad access and actively assisted in data collection efforts. Every EA's grantee caseload represented a spectrum of access from little or nothing to wide open and willing. During the three-year funding cycle, staff departures at the highest level of the organization sometimes reversed the level of access — for better or worse.

An EA at Semics saw this dynamic very clearly in operation at one grantee site offering a literacy program. "We had one director who was totally open. I didn't have to tell her every detail of where I would be during the site visit. She'd say just go ahead, and I'd let her know what I had observed and who I had interviewed. When she left and the new director came on board, my site visits ended. Even though Semics and First 5 LA explained our purpose to this new director, the doors closed. I haven't been able to schedule a site visit there for more than a year."

Importance of Following "The Hunch"

It's always easier to detect what's negative or what's not working in a program than to figure out what is working and why. Missteps stand out, while the ingredients of success are often harder to discern. It did not take many site visits for Semics EAs to identify grantees whose interventions were struggling, and the possible causes were readily apparent (e.g., culturally insensitive outreach efforts, error in assessment of the target population's needs, etc.). On the other hand, EAs immersed in sites with flourishing programs sensed it immediately but needed time to tease out the contributing elements.

From the moment one EA immersed in a site providing family literacy services, he knew that "something was happening right. This grantee's intervention was extremely well thought out. They were effective, and interacted with their target population in an amazing way. From the beginning, I wanted to figure out why this program was so successful and give our manager information about best practices. It was complicated because everything was so interconnected."

Following that hunch, the EA started to pay attention to organizational attributes. "I looked at the individuals running the program... I talked with parents, probing for how the program had changed their lives, how they had become invested in it." He discovered that adaptability was a key factor contributing to this grantee's success. "[Agency staff] were agile and open to saying, 'We don't know everything.' They could look at a mono-lingual, Spanish-speaking person with an elementary education and learn from her."

Semics EAs developed hunches and rudimentary connections into working hypotheses as they observed, collected, questioned and documented. As they gained contextual knowledge through Site Immersion and deepened the thickness of the data, full-fledged stories evolved from the exploration of relationships at the site level that were previously undocumented, unclear, or unknown. This is the "genius of qualitative research," according to Batiste. It is "the insightfulness, depth, and explanatory potential of these stories." [12]

Over the three-year evaluation period, Semics Site Immersion activities provided a progressive sense of the conditions that make possible those outcomes First 5 LA desired to see. Through firsthand exposure and reporting on the many unfolding sequences of events at the grantee site level Semics analysts gathered substantially relevant data to evaluate how positive outcomes and best practices evolve. Threads of meaning gleaned from Site Immersion coalesced into a deeper understanding of grantee activity, program effectiveness, and social investment, augmented by the data harvested from our parallel methodology—the CDI Learning Exchange.

The Learning Exchange — An Exercise in Knowledge Sharing

First 5 LA's original scope of work for the CDI Evaluation called for development of a collaborative network for the exchange of knowledge and information among CDI grantees. It was conceptualized as a venue for reinforcing the processes by which communities recognize, accumulate, and validate pragmatic forms of knowledge. As CDI's initiative-wide evaluator, Semics assumed responsibility for the design and facilitation of the Learning Exchange (LE) concept, organizing a series of events where all CDI grantees could meet face-to-face, problem-solve, and share experiences and expertise. The events were envisioned as a *safe haven* for discourse, action, and validation of the work grantees were doing. All the proceedings would be documented, analyzed and disseminated to the various stakeholders and simultaneously serve as a data gathering tool for the initiative-wide evaluation. The first CDI Learning Exchange convened in March 2004. Seven more gatherings were convened over the three-year funding cycle, with the last event held in June 2006.

Learning Exchange gatherings were designed to allow grantees and evaluators—participating as equals—to examine project struggles and challenges, validate successes, and document emergent lessons. In this dialogic learning environment, in which no one assumed expert status, CDI agencies would be able to engage as peer-learners and benefit from membership in a community of practice. But we could not assume that *community* would arise automatically simply because the grantees shared a common goal of improving the lives of young children and their families. Grantees came from across a far-reaching county, served a wide range of target populations, and offered diverse services and programs. Semics embraced the challenge of creating an authentic sense of community among 54 disparate grantees convening for one day, a total of eight times over a three-year period. To accomplish this, we drew upon concepts in contemporary social science to create conditions and activities at each LE event that would engender genuine community-building, learning, collaboration, and reflection.

Learning Exchange as a Methodology

The term "discourse community" was first used by sociolinguist Martin Nystrand in 1982 and further developed by American linguist John Swales. The concept embodies all meaning-making activity and links the two critical elements of *comm*unication and *comm*unity. A discourse community, explains social theorist Alan Ovens, "reinforces the social nature of knowledge production…Discourse interweaves language, action and identity in a way that engages and connects its participants, both immediately and over time and place, to give a sense of coherence and common purpose to a community." [13]

To provide the scaffolding for a discourse community to emerge, LE's concept designers sought to create ways for grantees to share and interpret their experiences in a participatory, interactive format that would reinforce their commonalities without negating their differences. Given that the very nature and content of discourse can provoke discord, linking it to the concept of community creates a stabilizing framework around which discourse can occur without harm.

Reflective action is fundamental to the pursuit of a sense of community. In a situated discourse community the nature of reflection is influenced by the environment, the members, and the tools they have at hand. Cinnamond & Zimpher observed that from this notion of community emerges reflection "upon meanings and practices for the purposes of generating consensus to create new meanings or to take away obstructions to appropriate actions." [14]

Kurt Lewin was a seminal theorist who deepened our understanding of group feedback and experiential learning. His work led to the establishment in 1947 of the first National Training Laboratory in Group Development in Bethel, Maine. Lewin biographer Michael Smith contends that Lewin coined the term "action research," which is oriented to problem-solving in social and organizational settings rather than theory building.[15] Long employed to help teachers develop and deepen their classroom practice, action research now plays a significant role in the strengthening of community-based organizations.

Dick captures the unique quality of action research as "neither research-for-action, nor action-for-research. It is essentially research–and–action in a single process." [16] Kemmis and McTaggart expand on this concept with the idea that action research "is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry by group participants undertaken with the intent of improving their own social or educational practices…It is a collaborative dynamic achieved though the critically examined action of individual group members." [17] Our intent to collect data while creating a collaborative venue for CDI grantees meshed with the dual objectives of action research—solving practical problems and contributing to new knowledge.

In action research, everyone is a player contributing to multiple levels of reflexivity, according to Myers.[18] Even the researcher functions as a change agent. Rapoport advocates that action research outcomes "contribute to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework." [19]

Action research is reality-based, mandating that participants learn with and from colleagues by reflecting on their own experiences with real issues. The approach stresses that participants must have some degree of control over the problem, in essence, they must be able to take action on it. By working on identified issues with others in the practice community, participants move seemingly intractable problems toward resolution, and most importantly, *learn about the process of learning itself.*

In the essay "Research as Interacting Dialogic Processes: Implications for Reflexivity," Russell and Kelly posit that we are changed by many aspects of the research process by "engaging in real conversations, through what we learn in the course of listening well, through participation in a process that allows new creations to occur, and through our own reflexivity."[20]

Action research engenders in participants a predisposition to ask the question; "How can we improve what we are doing?" It supports a reflexive mode in which peer mentoring and collaborative relations can flourish. In this environment, participants are more open to exploring how their interpretations of a situation connect with the viewpoints of others. By touching base with others' interpretations and finding commonalities (like the intersecting area in a Venn diagram), a communal knowing is created that is more than the personal construction of a single participant. It is this production of communal knowledge that strengthens and energizes the community.

Learning can remain hidden unless some reason arises for making it explicit. Dr. Judith Newman cites the concept of *critical incident* as the thing that compels us to explore and reappraise our assumptions. "Critical incidents are those moments which allow you to stand back and examine your beliefs...They are stories used as tools for conducting research on yourself. Critical incidents can occur in a variety of other ways — through reading, or overhearing a comment, or noticing how someone else is doing something you've always taken for granted, or suddenly seeing your own learning differently. Latent critical incidents are everywhere...they offer important opportunities for learning." [21]

In the safe-haven of the Learning Exchange, we envisioned multiple opportunities for grantees to see familiar situations with new eyes. By creating a comfort zone in which grantees could bring critical incidents at the site level to the table, opportunities for peer teaching and learning would abound. The process would provide a unique data stream for analysis while offering grantees the opportunity to delve beneath the surface and ask transformative questions such as; "How could we have dealt with this situation differently and what can we learn from it?"

Learning Exchange "By Design"

Learning Exchange events paralleled in some ways the life-cycle stages of organizational growth (formation, rapid expansion/development, stabilization, maturity and reflexivity). This progressive growth concept allowed Semics the flexibility to design adaptations in response to grantees' needs, and provided a subtle, underlying structure. However, the overarching theme of the Learning Exchange, clearly promoted to participants, was the participatory narrative. Grantees themselves would tell the story of CDI—collectively generating the next chapter at each day-long event.

Learning Exchange topics were targeted to meet both the data collection requirements of the CDI evaluation and the identified needs of grantees. Both needs were explicitly highlighted in grantee-driven, structured learning activities. Although Semics grounded the agenda in the preferences and needs of CDI grantees, these activities also pointed to a wider learning process for all CDI stakeholders, and the content at the core of the CDI initiative-wide evaluation.

A multi-component system of ongoing feedback was an important ingredient in the design and implementation of the Learning Exchange. First, one staff member of First 5 LA took an active role in planning and carrying out each event and, along the way, provided detailed feedback on Semics' own efforts. Second, Semics convened a "Learning Exchange Advisory Council" comprised of five CDI grantees and another grantee's external evaluator. The Council met in between Learning Exchange gatherings to reflect on lessons learned from the most recent event's proceedings, offer input on the theme for the next event, and weigh in on the selection of activities and program content. Third, participants at each event turned in evaluation forms ranking their level of satisfaction with each element of the day's Learning Exchange, detailing what parts they had enjoyed most and why, and critiquing the parts they felt had not gone as well. All three components of this feedback system were critical in giving Semics staff the real-time information needed to correct or improve preparations for the next Learning Exchange.

The **first Learning Exchange** gathering focused on "Finding Common Ground" and featured a dramatic presentation of "Stone Soup". In this time-honored fable, three weary soldiers coax each villager into adding something to a cauldron of soup the soldiers had started with just three stones and water. "Stone Soup" embodied the essence of the Learning Exchange process — everybody bringing something to the pot and everybody partaking of what's in it. Grantees would contribute their experience, stories and expertise, including their problems and concerns. They could take back with them shared answers to similar challenges and assurance from peers dealing with like issues. Ice-breakers and small-group activities created a space for grantees to introduce themselves and their projects, get to know each other and the Semics evaluators who served as facilitators.

LE 2 focused on "Building Common Ground" by grouping members with similar CDI projects together in breakout sessions. Activities focused on (among other things) building new linkages, networking and sharing successful strategies for increasing community participation. Under the banner of "Navigating Common Ground," **LE 3** focused on brainstorming around operational challenges, obstacles and barriers during the early stages of project implementation. Participants shared *critical incidents* and explored successful responses and strategies. The first part of this event adopted a talk show format featuring three grantees recounting how they adapt and innovate to address project challenges.

LE 4 was designed to help grantees "Uncover Hidden Stories." It featured a skill builder on productive thinking, illustrated through presentation of *"Billibonk and the Big Itch."* This charming children's tale focused grantees' attention on ways of looking behind a problem to discover the hidden, interrelated factors contributing to it. In a way, the aim of this exercise was similar to the Progressive Depth Matrix discussed earlier. *Open thought* activities in grantee-centered discussion groups then guided grantees to identify and describe their own evaluation practices and perspectives about evaluation. Participants explored data collection tools and approaches (qualitative v. quantitative) to clarify those best suited to assess their interventions—strengthening their knowledge and ability to comply with the project-specific evaluation required by the CDI-funding grant.

At **LE 5**, activities focused on the theme of "Building a Continuing Story." Grantees explored the challenge of sustainability beyond CDI funding, sharing strategies and resources. Event design created *open space* in breakout sessions for participants to discuss topics of interest (e.g., staff turnover, fundraising, documenting results, cultivating volunteers and community support).

LE 6 activities highlighted ways of "Connecting to a Larger Family" of grantees, including grantees who were visiting for the first time from non-CDI funding initiatives of First 5 LA. Connections and insights about shared characteristics and interests were elicited through grantee table discussions on collaboration, networks, and linkages defined by geography or similarity of services. **LE 7** focused on sharing project results achieved, success stories, results measurement, and best practices. At **LE 8**, CDI grantees co-hosted with Semics a celebration and reflection on successes and challenges, with First 5 LA staff and Commissioners attending as guests.

Semics evaluators involved in grantee Site Immersion served as LE facilitators of the small-group activities in round-table format and engaged in co-generative discourse with participants. They kept the dialog on track, weaving together various discussion threads, contributing their own insights, and building ties between people, programs, and newly shared knowledge.

We believed that capturing grantee narratives would provide a content-rich means of evaluating the effectiveness of CDI-funded projects. Mining these narratives in the context of a community of reflection would illuminate values, beliefs, and interrelated factors flying under the radar of quantitative measurement. "The act of creating the narrative," Newman suggests, "sets us up to be detectives; the narrative offers clues to the kinds of cultural values affecting our judgments. Hence the need for critical incidents, for tracking the surprises in the daily work we are doing."[22]

We anticipated that grantees would engage in the quest to tell their unfolding stories because storytelling "is natural and easy and entertaining and energizing," according to the authors of *Storytelling in Organizations*. They emphasize the merits of narrative as a learning tool this way: "Stories help us understand complexity. Stories can enhance or change perceptions. Stories are easy to remember…inherently non-adversarial and non-hierarchical. They bypass normal defense mechanisms and engage our feelings." [23]

All small-group activities and breakout sessions were documented. Note takers at every small-group table discussion recorded conversations among, and statements by, participants, and captured their stories. Semics staff provided a written synthesis of each table's insights and contributed their notes and insights to whole-event summaries. Summaries were posted to the CDI website within a few weeks, and summarized in "The Exchange," a newsletter available to all CDI grantees at the subsequent Learning Exchange event. Grantee feedback on each LE gathering was harvested through event-end evaluation forms and adaptations were made in response to their suggestions.

Learning Exchange "On the Ground"

Learning Exchange events transpired in varied meeting venues throughout Los Angeles and always included a continental breakfast and buffet lunch. Semics staff put great effort into decorating each environment around chosen themes (spring flowers, balloons, and luau,) to brighten the ambiance. Dramatic presentations by professional actors of the children's tale mentioned above engaged participants. These elements and the structured, grantee-driven learning activities created comfortable and inviting open spaces for grantee participation. An authentic sense of community developed over the course of these eight events. The methodology did present a few operational and content challenges, but participation in these gatherings resulted in numerous, interconnected benefits to CDI grantees, Semics evaluators, and the goals of the CDI initiative-wide evaluation.

Benefits Derived from Learning Exchange

The Learning Exchange was designed primarily as a data collection process but also, importantly, as a venue for peer learning among grantees. Although the CDI contract obligated their attendance, that requirement did not need enforcement. High attendance figures suggest that grantees chose to come without external pressure and kept returning because the Learning Exchange did have practical value for them. It opened spaces for grantees to be receptive to input from peers, express concerns, share knowledge and collaborate. The intrinsic value of these interactions buttressed the Learning Exchange as a data collection method and conferred multiple benefits on the grantees as well as Semics evaluators involved in the CDI Learning Exchange and Site Immersion.

Storytelling, Dialog, and Conversation

Our experiences with grantee participants in the Learning Exchange corroborate Banyard and Miller's observation that it is empowering for people to tell their stories; it is especially powerful to have their stories heard.[24] Commentary in post-LE surveys consistently pointed to these positive effects. One grantee wrote that "the storytelling validated the importance of our CDI project." Another added that sharing of stories across projects provided "encouragement, inspiration, and confirmation of the good work we do."

Grantee agencies often work in isolation, unaware of each other's projects or their cumulative impact on the community. Under the dual pressures of high staff turnover and fundraising, they rarely have time to connect with like agencies and celebrate their successes. Post-LE feedback suggests that grantees derived additional benefits from the Exchange's focus on dialog, conversation and connection, including less isolation and a strengthening of the "fabric of the community."

Tannen, as cited in Bradley, offers a possible explanation of this dynamic: "Shared rhythms and mutual understanding embedded in the flow of conversation allows participants to experience a sense of satisfaction that goes beyond the pleasure of having one's message understood." She defines conversation as "a proof of connection to other people that provides a sense of coherence in the world." [25]

Community Building

The Learning Exchange functioned for some as "a glue and catalyst in connecting grantees," helping to reveal "how we are intertwined." One grantee was relieved "to learn that other organizations are experiencing the same things as we are," because that provided assurance "that we are in this process together." Another came to realize "how far this program extends into the community, how many different levels it touches, its impact on people's lives." The Learning Exchange gave one participant the "sense that we are 'one team' doing what we believe in" and reminded another that "we are all a part of a larger community with similar goals." It was satisfying for another grantee to "be able to work with people who share my same passion and vision."

Support for the Process

Grantees also commented on feeling re-invigorated by new ideas and the "supportive relationships" that the Exchange fostered, including "Semics' intense involvement with grantees." This finding was important to the extent it reflects First 5 LA's interest in supporting the process as well as the results. One participant recommended: "If you need a shot in the arm, come to a Learning Exchange." Exchange events gave some an "incentive to keep going" and "motivated" others "to do more."

New Knowledge

The Learning Exchange methodology generated a solid data stream regarding the extent to which participants gained "new perspectives" and knowledge they intended to take back to their sites and apply. Several grantees commented that they had used the "*Stone Soup*" and "*Billibonk*" stories to expand the thinking of their staff at the site level. Another shared that they were able to "enhance services via the tools learned." One gleaned "new ideas on how to expand our evaluation to capture more of its richness" while another came to see "the relationship between evaluation and sustainability" in a new light.

Addressing Challenges

The central premise of action research—intensive focus on problem solving and addressing real issues in the company of peers—was one of the most highly commended aspects of the Learning Exchange methodology. Grantees' comments regarding breakout sessions and small-group discussions placed high value on the opportunity to exchange "tips and advice from other service providers on how challenges have been overcome." Opportunities for participants to "discuss their unique challenges and get feedback" were characterized as "helpful," "useful," and "broadening my vision." One grantee wrote: "brainstorming on real issues can only improve our projects."

The talk show format featured in LE 3 produced meaningful data on challenges, breakthroughs, promoting community engagement and dialog. Grantees dealing with low parent participation in their programs listened and learned from other grantees who shared successful strategies for increasing parent participation.

In some cases, Learning Exchange events functioned as a kind of change agent. "It helped us take a look at our program from another angle, see where there were needs for improvement and showed us how to make those improvements," wrote one grantee. "We utilized the discussions to self-assess our own program."

Peer Learning

The Learning Exchange embodied a *we-are-all-experts* approach with the aim of empowering participants to discover the wisdom they already possessed and could share. Many were initially resistant to the idea of grantee-driven discussions. Feedback from the first few post-event surveys included requests for more "substance," "structure," and the need to hear from First 5 LA program officials. Newcomers who joined the Learning Exchange in mid-stream were not used to the *learn-from-your-peers* approach that the other participants had, by then, embraced. Semics staff made design adjustments to accommodate this understandable learning curve. By the third gathering, grantees began to embrace the *experience-is-the-best-teacher* perspective and their feedback indicated they "liked the focus on solving problems through human interaction, not by lectures." Another "liked the concept of learning from other grantees, and not from the granting agency or Semics."

Value to Semics Research and Staff

Consistent with the tenets of action research, Semics staff functioned as facilitators, not experts. They actively encouraged and participated in the sharing of ideas and solutions among grantees. LE activities created a kind of scaffolding that allowed evaluators facilitating table discussions to make transitions between and among the various relationships and dialogs. Hearing this multiplicity of voices expanded the evaluators' understanding of the challenges facing the grantees.

"Every Learning Exchange is like doing simultaneous site visits," noted one Semics EA. "If we get 30 grantees to attend an LE event, it's like doing 30 site visits in one day." The director of a grantee project this EA was observing at the site level was a featured presenter during the simulated talk show. What the director shared with the whole group about the project's operating challenges validated the EA's observations and furnished new material to follow-up on her next site visit.

As in Site Immersion, Semics evaluators listened to and mined grantee discussion during LE activities for any undetected *multiplier effects* that could demonstrate how CDI funding had brought about positive, *unintended* outcomes in support of First 5 LA's goals.

Grantee participation in Learning Exchange events often had positive spill over effects on Semics' Site Immersion efforts. One evaluator, having difficulty gaining access to a mental health program he had been assigned to observe, saw that the Learning Exchange could open doors: "I had one grantee who didn't go to the first two Learning Exchanges. When she went to the third one, she totally changed after that with me." Another evaluator noticed a progressively improved disposition with one of his grantees: "Every time they came to a Learning Exchange event they were more excited to be there."

Semics staff worked to ensure that each Learning Exchange provided a fertile arena for cross-agency sharing and support. Wherever our evaluators saw synergistic potential, they assisted grantees in developing contacts, resources, and connections that might lead to collaboration or, at least, useful dialogue and peer-based learning. Their efforts increased opportunities for service coordination and cross-fertilization of innovations, successes, problem solving and capacity development. For example, through a connection forged at the Learning Exchange, two grantees — one with the know-how, the other with the space and the need — initiated a collaboration that resulted in the building of a community garden for a pre-school.

Lessons Learned from the Learning Exchange

Semics regarded negative comments gleaned from post-event surveys as equally important to the methodology and plumbed them for appropriate adaptations that would better serve the grantees and our data collection efforts.

Several grantees expressed the desire for more time in small group discussion to strategize and brainstorm. Others wanted more extended opportunities to network. A few were critical of the arts activities that required each small group to jointly construct a symbolic statement about CDI-funded projects using craft items. "More time was spent on glue, scissors, construction paper, crayons, scotch taping and not enough time to share our strengths and challenges," lamented one grantee. Another felt these art-centered activities were too "elementary, took too much time, and served no purpose."

Semics responded to grantee suggestions for improvement, for example, quickening the pace and shortening the total run time of the gatherings. We started providing take-home notes of participants' comments at day's end, and included a contact list of Learning Exchange participants in the packets distributed to grantees at subsequent events.

Some grantees pointed out that follow through on ideas and challenges brought to the fore at Learning Exchange events was sometimes weak. "This type of meeting is useful in having program staff think about barriers but all the brainstorming dies off after the meeting" without follow-up, observed one grantee.

Semics Evaluation Associates agreed, pointing to structural problems as a contributing factor to weak follow-up. In post-event debriefings, the EAs updated each other about various grantee challenges they learned about from LE discussions, and often followed up on this knowledge in subsequent site visits. However Semics "wasn't set up to handle the variety of technical assistance challenges the grantees had," one EA observed, resulting in some disappointment with Semics, in this regard, on the part of certain grantees.

It was suggested that future permutations of the Learning Exchange / Site Immersion evaluation framework include resources for a dedicated technical assistance "specialist" to effectively respond to grantees' requests of this nature. Alternatively, Semics could have worked with the Grants Management Department at First 5 LA to formulate and implement a tighter, more responsive approach to the technical assistance needs of grantees as these needs surfaced. In either case, grantee interactions with a technical assistance provider, whether on Semics or First 5 LA staff, would have offered a complementary source of data on the impact that grantee technical competencies or frailties have on the initiative's strategic goals of strengthening program delivery and building capacity.

Conclusions

Semics presented annual summaries of its findings to First 5 LA at different times during the three-year, initiative-wide evaluation of CDI. Mapping the landscape of CDI-funded interventions was the guiding motif of the first-year findings. This map revealed both intended and unintended positive effects in terms of school readiness. For example, projects focusing on family literacy are primarily interested in increasing the frequency that parents read to their 0-5 children. However, our evaluative process revealed that these projects indirectly support greater parent-child bonding — a factor that contributes vitally to the socio-emotional health of children and strengthens family cohesion. We also identified broad-based effects of CDI, and how grantees were evolving as a community with respect to the three outcome areas specified in the design of the CDI evaluation.

Summary findings in the second year focused on linkages across geographic areas and intervention types that addressed similar problems among different populations. We documented how CDI-funded projects and collaborations increased opportunities for learning about the community. We also brought to fore organizational conditions under which collaborative agreements lead to greater productivity, information sharing, infrastructure, and sustainability of provider networks.

We found that the CDI Learning Exchange helped grantees achieve their goals by reinforcing the practices of a learning organization. Learning Exchange gatherings informed and expanded the effectiveness of communication between grantees and empowered them to implement and manage change more easily within their organizations. Grantee involvement in our evaluation methodologies helped them appreciate and apply new strategies to their task of program-specific evaluation. Our focus on narratives and shared stories opened grantees to different perspectives which in turn energized and amplified the effectiveness of their efforts.

The success of our methodologies was heightened by Semics' cross-cultural staff whose broad understanding of grantees' real life community context enabled them to *speak the language* of participants. As evaluators, we listened carefully to grantee and community voices, listened especially carefully to the voices that were quiet, and even to those that were absent. Our commitment to dialogic modes of interaction kept us aware and agile in responding to participants' needs, and our investment in deep, enduring relationships with them facilitated access to the illustrative narratives of change we reported on.

Site Immersion and Learning Exchange allowed us to take partial snapshots of grantees' progress and their impact on target populations over time. Separately, these snapshots revealed specific knowledge, but not an integrated understanding. Semics collected, analyzed and assembled these myriad, distinct *parts* into a coherent *whole* for First 5 LA. While reflecting the daily challenges grantees and participants face, the findings provided an integral understanding of ways CDI funding has helped address those concerns and strengthened community capacity to respond to those challenges.

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