Project Zero: The First Fifty-Five Years

Kirsten McHugh, Katie Abramowitz, Yvonne Liu-Constant, Howard Gardner

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Background

Project Zero, housed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, began in 1967. It was founded by the philosopher Nelson Goodman and—facilitated by Dean Theodore Sizer—was initially funded by the Old Dominion Foundation. The initial purpose of PZ—as it is widely known, along with HPZ—was to carry out fundamental research on education in the arts. As Goodman famously quipped, *"The state of general communicable knowledge about arts education is zero. We're starting at zero, so we are Project Zero."* The whimsical name has stuck, though we trust that we have moved well beyond zero systematic knowledge.

Over the decades, Project Zero has extended well beyond the arts, to cover a great deal of the curriculum. It has ranged over the age spectrum and educational gamut, from young children to mature learners, from schools to institutions like museums and corporations, from teachers to leaders in different fields of knowledge and practice. The appendix to this report lists historical accounts as well as selected reviews of work carried out at Project Zero.

Importantly, Project Zero has always been a "soft money" research project. There is no endowment—indeed, the University receives overhead on every grant and gift. It's accurate to say that those who work at HPZ need to raise their own salaries and benefits. We are aware of very few research centers with such longevity… and such productivity and world-wide influence.

In 1992, with Nelson Goodman as honored guest, PZ celebrated its 25th birthday; in 2018, with all succeeding directors present, PZ celebrated its 50th birthday. For information about these events, please see the appendix.

The Creation of a Survey

As Project Zero passed middle age, it seemed timely to survey members of the organization—past and present—to determine how they thought about Project Zero—what was most salient to them, what they praised and prized the most, what they saw as the major problems in the past or challenges in the future. And so, as almost reflexive researchers, we developed a survey and sent it to all 47 current PZ members (who have worked with the organization for at least two years), and to the 114 past members (for whom we had contact information). In all 167 surveys were sent out and 106 surveys were returned—31 current members (66%) and 75 past employees (also

66%) responded to the survey. We were very pleased at this turnout rate, far greater than is usually obtained in uncompensated surveys of this sort.

Moreover, in addition to the quantity of responses, we were gratified as well by the seriousness with which "PZers" treated the questionnaires. Many wrote quite extensive comments, few if any treated the survey casually. And, especially impressively, asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed as well, an overwhelming majority (82%) said that they would. We hope that, before much time has elapsed, we can follow up with some of these agreeable respondents.

It was important for those with the biggest and longest stake in the organization to keep at arm's length from the analysis of the data. And except to make sure that the responses had been properly received, no leader or long-time member of Project Zero examined the surveys.

Instead, we asked two newcomers to Project Zero—Katie Abramowitz and Yvonne Liu-Constant—to code and analyze the data and report the findings. Kirsten McHugh, a long time PZer, helped Katie and Yvonne get started but was not herself involved in the coding.

In what follows, we report the principal questions that were raised and the principal findings that were obtained. We expect to be posting as well the actual number of responses to each question. Ultimately, we hope to post the full set of responses, but this step would require de-identification--a time consuming and costly process. In the future, qualified researchers will have access to these data. Not only will these responses give a rich picture of one long-lived educational research organization; the responses will also provide comparative data for other organizations that elect to survey past and present workers.

Findings

While we would have liked to analyze each question of the survey in depth, time imposed limits. For this report, we focus on what we believe are the four key questions:
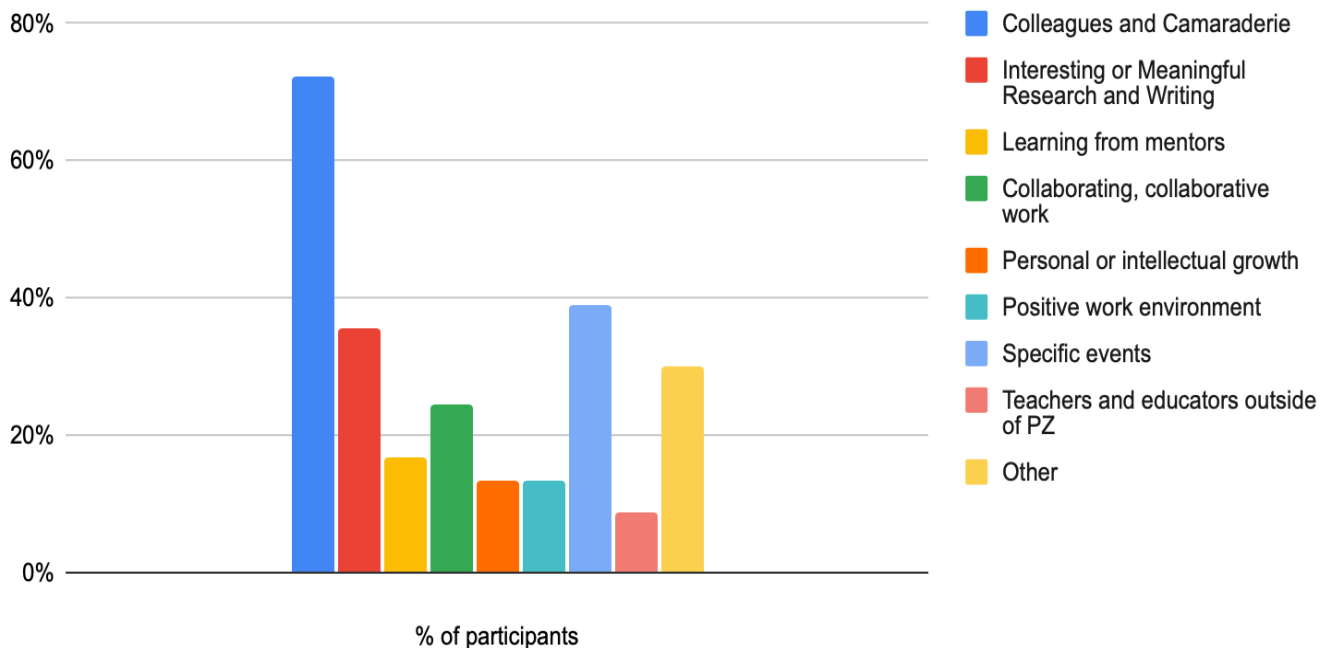
1. What were your best experiences at Project Zero?

2. What facets of Project Zero would you most like to change?

3. If you had to describe Project Zero to an acquaintance in a few sentences, what would you say?

4. What experiences from your time at Project Zero, if any, do you still think back to or have you applied to your life since?

: The fourth question was only asked of former employees, while the other three were asked of both current and former Project Zero employees.

What were your best experiences at Project Zero?

In total, we received 90 responses to the question of "What were your best experiences at Project Zero?", 62 of which came from former employees with the 28 remaining responses coming from current employees. The most common category of response was "*Colleagues and Camaraderie*" (72%), as many participants included an appreciation for their fellow coworkers in their comments. Following the grouping related to interpersonal relationships, was the category of "*Interesting or Meaningful Research and Writing*" (36%). Responses in this category represent comments about the engaging nature of the work done at Project Zero. The third largest category of response was "*Specific Events*" (39%). Comments in this grouping reflect fond memories of occasions such as the large annual Project Zero Summer Institute, as well as the more frequent community meetings, team meetings, and workshops.

What were (or have been) your best experiences at Project Zero?

This category encompasses remarks about meeting lifelong friends, working on a team, and engaging in meaningful conversations. While some categories of responses do not come up equally as often for both current and former employees, this grouping represents the largest portion of comments for both demographics. 71% of responses from former employees commented on the personal connections forged at Project Zero. Likewise, 75% of responses from current Project Zero employees pointed to meaningful relationships with their colleagues as having a positive influence on their experience with the organization.

One former employee described life-long friendships that led to professional collaboration over many years:

> *"I also greatly valued the camaraderie of co-workers and colleagues, and felt it was a unique community in many ways. Friendships have lasted over the decades, and I've been able to collaborate with former colleagues in my current position. It's moving to think about what the group was like back then, and the time was significant in many ways."*

Other responses describe the encouragement from fellow Project Zero members to think deeply and explore ideas:

> *"The collaborative nature of the work there, the sense of support among colleagues, the friendships that developed, the deep thinking--it truly was a highlight career experience for me."*

> *"Opportunities for deep conversation, flexible thinking, and taking time to dwell in ambiguity and exploring ideas…"*

A few respondents credit strong professional bonds amongst their Project Zero coworkers with encouraging them to grow intellectually and personally:

> *"My best experiences were working with amazing colleagues, having intellectually playful and engaging discussions, and working together with common goals and values. Also, the respect for me as a young scholar was amazing. I was given significant research, analytical and writing responsibility*

and really thrived on having the opportunities. This conveyed deep respect and trust - and feedback also helped me grow."

"The best experience was to work with and get to know so many talented and creative professionals. I learned a lot from them, not only about education and work ethics, but also about myself (my preferences, my strengths, and my shortcomings). In many ways, PZ "opened my mind."
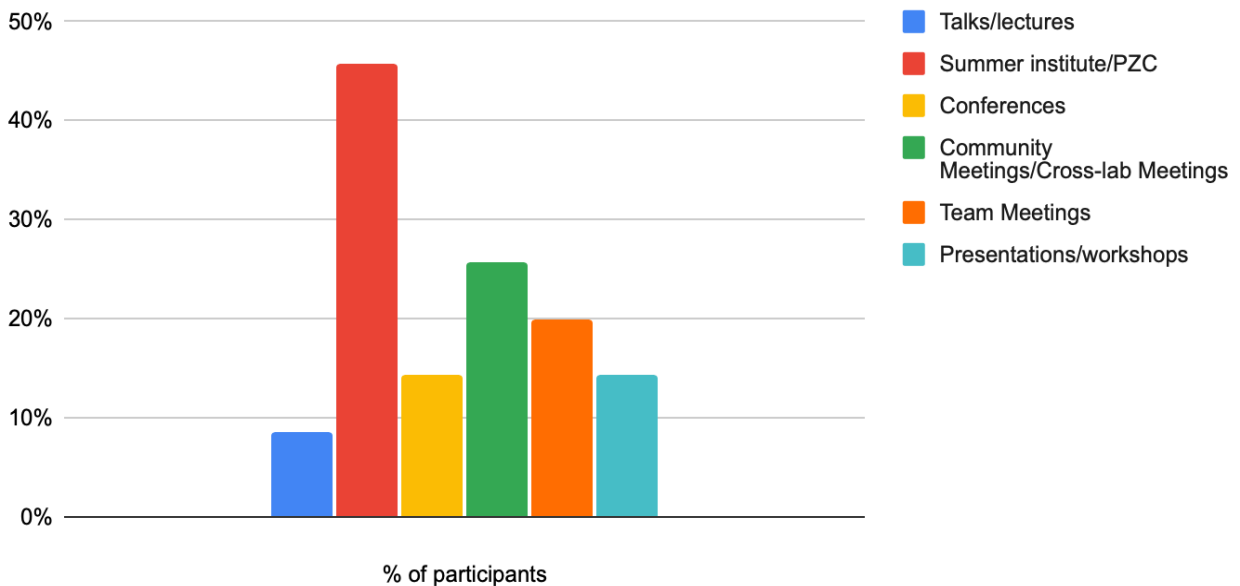
One participant describes the community of Project Zero as a "special" collection of inspirational colleagues:

"Working with GOOD people (excellent, engaged and ethical), all people I met there were exceedingly interesting, smart and kind. Those kinds of people are hard to find and somehow Project Zero managed to have a big share of them."

Specific Events

Not surprisingly, when asked about their "best experiences at Project Zero", many participants' minds drifted to specific events that left a lasting, positive impact (39%). There is no difference in the percentage of comments related to this classification when comparing former and current employees.

Specific PZ Events

% of participants

Legend:
- Talks/lectures
- Summer institute/PZC
- Conferences
- Community Meetings/Cross-lab Meetings
- Team Meetings
- Presentations/workshops

As the second most common category of response, this classification was broken down into smaller groupings in an attempt to identify the specific experiences that participants pointed to as positive impacts. Predictably, The Project Zero Summer Institute represents the bulk of responses related to specific events (46%). This annual event held at HGSE for over two decades brings together hundreds of educators both domestically and internationally. Participants described the energy of meeting so many individuals that draw on Project Zero research for their own implementation in the classroom:

> *"The summer institute was always an uplifting and rewarding experience. Understanding how large the community and how global the PZ influence provided reaffirmation of my commitment to work with such an amazing group"*

> *"The summer institute — developing a collaboration among practicing teachers and university researchers."*

The institute is also a rare opportunity for Project Zero to come together as a whole—a particularly meaningful occasion for an organization that encompasses many seemingly disparate lines of research. Participants commented on the institute as a way of connecting as a larger community:

> *"Collaboration with colleagues both inside and out of the organization. The PZC is a lovely embodiment of this."*

> *"Being part of a big professional family through the PZ Classroom."*

> *"The times when we all come together with a shared purpose - the summer institutes. The PZ 50th."*

Community meetings involving cross-lab interactions (26%) as well as individual team meetings (20%) were also frequently described as having a positive impact on participants' Project Zero experience. One participant explained that–similar to the large Project Zero Summer Institute–the community meetings allow different research teams to learn from and about one another's work.

> *"…also the smaller, even informal events and conversations where we exchange ideas with researchers on other projects and walk away with new insights and wisdom for our own work.*

Other participants acknowledged the coherent and engaging nature of the community gatherings and team meetings, as well as their professionalism:

> *"Team meetings and community meetings were always something I looked forward to - very well organized, productive, interesting, and inspiring."*

> *"The weekly all project meetings where we heard from each other about what we were doing and benefited from the broader base of insight and expertise."*

Interestingly, while community meetings were equally important to both former and current Project Zero employees, team meetings were only mentioned in 9% of responses related to specific events by current employees compared to 25% of such responses from former employees. On the whole, former employees' comments about specific events were more evenly distributed amongst the various subcategories than are the responses from current employees.

Other specific events highlighted in participants' comments were:
- Presentations/Workshops – 14%
- Conferences – 14%
- Talks/Lectures – 9%

Interesting or Meaningful Research and Writing

The third most common response related to the "best experiences at Project Zero" was "interesting or meaningful research and writing" (36%). This relates to the intellectual nature of participants' work at Project Zero. That is, participants describe being engaged in the content of their work.

Interestingly, this response was more common among current Project Zero employees (50% vs 29%, respectively). This result could be due to any number of factors, though it should be noted that this survey was conducted in the fall of 2021–a year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic. It's possible that due to the isolated nature of this time current employees were more focused than ever on the content of their work.

Many of the responses related to the content of the work at Project Zero describe specific projects. The examples below exemplify the impact of particular studies that participants were involved in:

"I most enjoyed the early basic research with young kids and aesthetic perceptions, understanding of irony and nonliteral speech acts, work with ArtsPropel in Pittsburgh, and consulting with the Worcester Art Museum come to mind first."

"I encountered such a myriad of formative experiences while at Project Zero; consequently, this a near-impossible question to answer. Nonetheless, working on "The App Generation" first comes to mind. I learned so much from the research and from the process. I loved helping to edit the manuscript and working with the publisher. I found the entire experience incredibly interesting and rewarding."

"As I said in my previous response, the work on Making Learning Visible--with the Reggio educators, the PZ team and the many U.S. based teachers--was both an amazing opportunity to bring together my photography/media skills and passion for social change."

Other comments related to the content of the work at Project Zero represent more generic references to the exciting and purposeful nature of the work:

"…to do work that made a difference"

"...thinking about how we work with teachers and students on different projects and understand their impact, collecting data, and writing about our learnings."

"Becoming immersed in empirical research on artistic development"

"Feeling like we're building on decades of good work and are part of something bigger than ourselves"

Other Categories of Response

A number of other groupings emerged:

- Other (specific comments such as "travel", "being a Principal Investigator", "being taken seriously as a young person", as well as ambiguous comments such as "so many" or "I could write a book") – 30%
- Collaborating/Collaborative Work – 24%
- Learning from mentors – 17%

- Personal or Intellectual Growth – 13%
- Positive work environment (welcoming atmosphere, sense of community) – 13%
- Interactions with Teachers and Educators Outside of Project Zero – 9%

Which facets of PZ would you most like to change?

We asked participants to divulge the facets of Project Zero that they would most like to change. The top category for this question was "Don't know/Can't think of any" (26% of all responses). Notably, 100% of the responses that fell under this category came from former PZ staff members; 39% of former employees (compared with 0 current employees) couldn't think of something to change. Following this category, the top themes that emerged for this question were: *Financial stability/Funding* (23%), *More Racial and Cultural Diversity Among PZ Members* (14%), and *More Collaboration Between Projects* (14%).

Which facets of PZ would you most like to change?

Legend:
- Abandonment of the arts
- More community engagement
- More outreach, dissemination
- More racial and cultural diversity among PZ members
- Career trajectories and responsibilities
- More collaboration between projects
- Financial stability/Funding
- In-groups
- Don't know
- Other
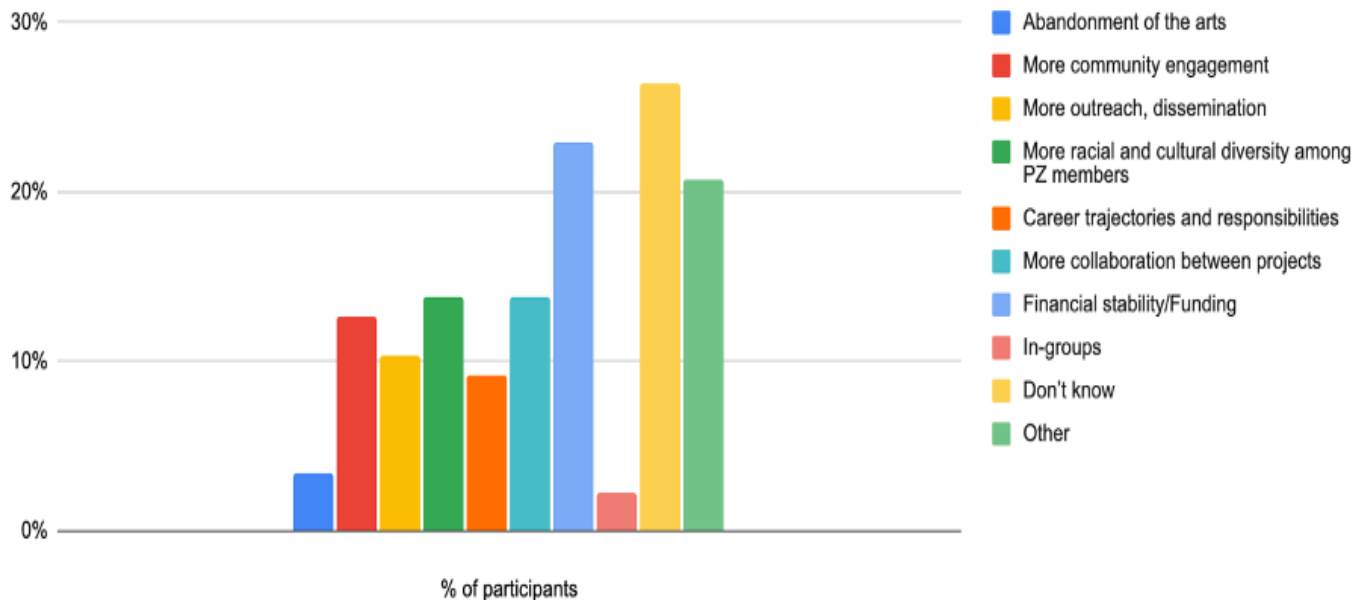
Financial Stability and Funding

Almost a quarter (23%) of all participants said that they would make changes related to financial stability and funding structures at PZ. This category was higher for current employees than former employees (46% vs. 12%, respectively). Within this category,

participants typically brought up ongoing pressures to secure funding for PZ projects, or what one participant described as "*the constant financial pressure attached to the intellectual work.*" In one response, a participant pointed to PZ's reliance on soft money and how this has led to mental health challenges:

> *"The funding structure. Project Zero abides by an outdated funding model that over-relies on soft money. This works for some who have long term relationships with funders that just keep writing checks (like ISV and LEGO) but not so much for others that are in a constant struggle to hustle for money to fund the next project. (I'm actually in therapy to deal with the stress of constantly raising money to fund my own job, and the jobs of the staff members I have hired.)*

Other participants echoed this sentiment, homing in specifically on worries about job security:

> *"Well, I don't think you can change this, but it would be nice not to fear the loss of my job every year. But. I suppose that is grant-funded life!"*

> *"I think one of the biggest challenges when I was there was the question of ongoing commitment to PZ by HGSE. The lack of ongoing financial support left many staff uneasy about their futures. Not an ideal way to function."*

> *"The lack of job security (since RA's are on yearly contracts)…"*

A few participants proposed that Harvard University make more of an effort to support Project Zero's work. For instance:

> *"It was difficult to work on soft money. Too much time was spent trying to identify and secure funding for the work. If there was anything I would like to have changed [it would be] to require Harvard University to share some of their massive endowment with the important research projects happening at Project Zero."*

One a more positive note, one participant brought up a silver lining of the constant need to secure funding, namely that it keeps your "brain alive."

> *"The stress of grant writing to keep food on the table. The upside of that challenge was that it continually kept your brain alive. There was little time to rest on one's laurels, given the next 'deliverable,' renewal, or deadline was imminent."*

A number of participants (14%) emphasized the need for more racial and cultural diversity among PZ staff, often pointing to what one participant referred to as the organization's "overwhelming whiteness." As with the previous category, this concern was more prevalent among current staff (29%) than former employees (7%). Within this category, both current and former employees spoke about a lack of racial diversity within the organization:

> *"I don't know the extent to which the PZ team has become racially diverse. It was not when I worked there."*

One current employee described the overrepresentation of white individuals among PZ staff as an ethical issue:

> *"I'd like to see us continue to open up as an organization - we can be a bit of an island unto ourselves and our overwhelming whiteness is a practical, intellectual and ethical issue - so broadening who is at PZ, the intellectual influences we're drawing from, who we're doing work with, which audiences we're reaching etc."*

Another current employee suggested that PZ incorporate more international diversity among staff in order to more closely resemble the organization's audience, which tends to be from outside the United States:

> *"Given that our most likely audience is and will continue to be international, I believe we could benefit from (a) internationalizing and diversifying our research teams (b) continue to reflect on our organizational capacity for intercultural dialogue and understanding."*

In addition to issues of representation among PZ staff members, a few participants brought up a need for a greater organizational focus on issues of equity and inclusion. For instance:

> *"I love that PZ continues to evolve based on the interests/passions of its researchers and staff AND the availability of resources to go in new directions. I like to follow its changes more than wanting to change it. That said, I'm especially excited by recent work to envision and manifest a more diverse PZ and one that focuses on issues of equity and inclusion."*

Finally, a number of participants brought up the sentiment that they feel siloed within their individual projects and teams. 14% of participants raised a desire for more collaboration and interaction among projects at PZ. Again, this category was brought up more by current employees (32%) than it was by former PZers. The majority of participants within this category spoke about how PZ projects feel detached from one another, limiting opportunities to learn from and collaborate with other researchers. For instance:

> *"Sometimes the different projects felt so separate it was really hard to see how you could learn about a new area or contribute to a different project."*

> *"I suppose it's the age-old issue of wanting to work with other groups and collaborate more freely. I don't think this is possible without general funding to cover people's time. We are all working so hard on our own grants (fulfilling obligations and keeping an eye out for what is next), there is little time to work across projects."*

A few participants brought up the fact that opportunities to gather across projects exist at PZ, but described these meetings as being generally unproductive:

> *"PZ often feels as if we are working in 'parallel play,' hard to get to know other PZers and work across projects, goals and time spent during organization-wide meetings (they don't often feel useful and tend to drag on)..."*

> *"We are many disparate research projects that don't seem to benefit from (or want to take the time to take into account) one another's expertise. Everyone is busy and it feels as though we go through a dance of learning about one another's work (which often takes a huge amount of time) and nothing comes of it. I would vote either we figure it out or we stop trying."*

> *"While we do make time to connect across projects as a full staff, I find it difficult at times to feel connected to PZ as a whole organization. And COVID has made me feel much more disconnected from PZ as a whole, instead operating just within my immediate team. I looked at the staff list on our website the other day and realized I did not know some of the names or faces. At the same time, while I desire more connection with others at PZ and opportunities for collaboration, when we do meet, sometimes it can feel unfocused. (To put it harshly, I sometimes leave community meetings feeling as though I wasted time I could have spent on work.) I am not sure how to solve this puzzle, but it does seem we need more fruitful and productive ways of fostering a PZ community spirit."*

Other Categories

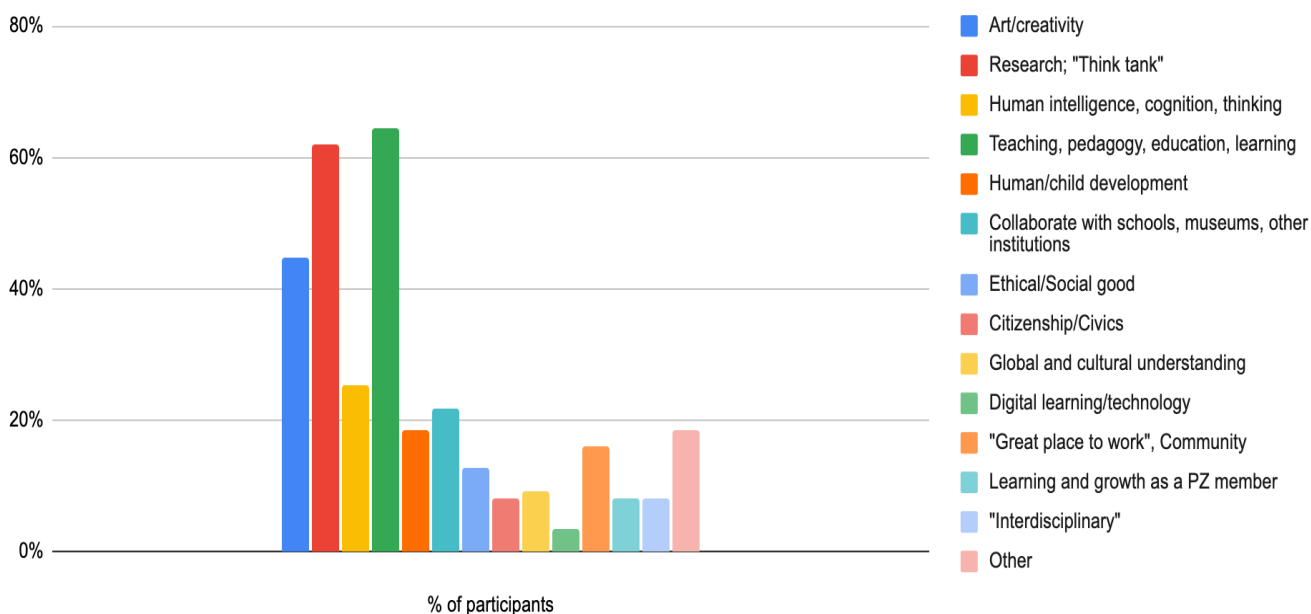In addition to the top categories, the following themes were also raised by participants:

- Other (e.g., parking/location, getting a marketing person, integrating PZ work with HGSE research, debate that was overly polite, a sense of self-importance) – 21%
- More community engagement (e.g., reaching out to communities most in need) – 13%
- More outreach and dissemination (e.g., making PZ work known) – 10%
- Career trajectories and responsibilities (e.g., opportunities for growth) – 9%
- Abandonment of the arts – 3%
- In-groups – 2%

If you had to describe Project Zero to an acquaintance in a few sentences, what would you say?

This question was asked of both former and current Project Zero employees. In total, we received 87 responses (60 from former employees, and 27 from current employees). The top category of response to this question was "*Teaching, Pedagogy, Education and Learning*" (64%). A close second was "*Research Think Tank*" (62%).

Not surprisingly, these two categories were often mentioned together in the responses. That is, many of the comments explained that Project Zero is a "research center" which explores and supports "teaching, pedagogy, learning and education". The third most common category of response were those related to "*Arts and Creativity*" (45%). An original goal of Project Zero was to understand more about cognition and the arts, an effort that continues today. As with the top two categories mentioned above, comments about the Arts and Creativity were often intertwined with comments about education and research, as well as other disciplines explored at Project Zero (e.g., civics, cognition, etc.).

If you had to describe Project Zero to an acquaintance in a few sentences, what would you say?

Legend:
- Art/creativity
- Research; "Think tank"
- Human intelligence, cognition, thinking
- Teaching, pedagogy, education, learning
- Human/child development
- Collaborate with schools, museums, other institutions
- Ethical/Social good
- Citizenship/Civics
- Global and cultural understanding
- Digital learning/technology
- "Great place to work", Community
- Learning and growth as a PZ member
- "Interdisciplinary"
- Other

% of participants

Teaching, Pedagogy, Education and Learning

As noted, when asked to explain Project Zero "in a nutshell", this was the most common category of response by participants. Many comments describe Project Zero in terms of the organization's commitment to understanding education, teaching, and learning:

> *"An organization that seeks to understand and promote what really matters in teaching, learning and human development across the lifespan."*

> *"PZ is a group of scholars, teachers, and students committed to exploring educational topics and innovations with creativity, rigor and enthusiasm."*

> *"Project Zero is a world-wide collaboration of educators and researchers committed to understand deep learning, thinking, and creativity in a variety of disciplines and to develop tools to apply that knowledge elsewhere."*

Some of the comments specifically describe the far reaching–sometimes lofty–efforts of those at Project Zero:

> *"A Harvard-based group founded to study arts education that went on to explore many other facets of education and related human endeavors."*

> *"A community of researchers modeling the tenants of Good Work while pursuing answers to some of the most important questions about the past, present, and future of education."*

> *"Project Zero is a research group investigating the role of and best practices for education in the 21st-Century. Through concrete research and investigation, Project Zero aims to explore the interaction between the arts, interdisciplinary endeavors, and overarching educational processes on humanity."*

> *"PZ may have begun with a touch of Nelson Goodman irony with an idea to advance arts education to a position that was 'not zero,' but that linear assumption was never going to explain the simple complexity of the arts, or human learning. PZ has always had ambitious expectations of what research can do but it never lets method thwart the curiosity of what's not there. Seems to me that zero has always been part of infinity."*

Interestingly, while comments from former Project Zero employees mention ties to teaching and learning 55% of the time, current Project Zero employees describe this category even more often--- at a rate of 85%. It is still the top category for both demographics, though it's hard to determine why the topic comes up so much more often for current versus former Project Zero members.

Research "Think Tank"

As the name suggests, Project Zero is a research hub consisting of numerous self-sustaining projects and studies. When asked how they would describe Project Zero to others, many participants included a description of this type of research center in their response.

Some such responses use the term "research" as a nod to the structure of Project Zero:

> *"Project Zero is a groundbreaking research entity that is an umbrella for dozens of research projects that look at arts and education, creativity, leadership, classroom growth and so much more."*

> *"PZ is comprised of numerous research projects, investigating topics as disparate as ethics, leadership, global understanding, digital life and learning and much more. We are united by the interests of our various researchers, and our desire to make our learnings available and accessible to a wide audience."*

Other participants described Project Zero as a "think tank" where "big ideas" can be explored.

> *"A think tank and lab-studio for seeing the ideas of children in their most dignified and joyous light, and for building the cultures and infrastructures to support those ideas."*

> *"An intellectual hub that discovers, implements, and disseminates knowledge to empower the mind, change the practice, and foster human development."*

> *"I describe it as an "educational research think tank based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. We focus on things like thinking dispositions, character education, ethics, global education, etc."*

Similarly to the category of *Teaching, Learning, Pedagogy and Education*, current employees described the organization as research based, or as a think tank 81% of the time; former employees included this distinction in their response at a much lower rate of 53%. Again, it's not clear why there is such a difference between the two groups, though some former employees did say that they were not sure how the organization has changed since their time with it.

Art & Creativity

Mentions of art and creativity comprise the third most common category of responses to the question of how one would describe Project Zero to a friend or acquaintance. While this was the third most common category overall, it was only the fourth most common category for current employees. Interestingly, current employees' third most common category of response described "*Collaboration with schools, museums, other institutions for application, scaling, adaptation*". It's possible that this finding represents a bit of a shift in focus at Project Zero over the years.

The ways in which the arts and creativity came up in participants' responses is somewhat varied. One way they are described is as a part of the origins of Project Zero:

> *"Project Zero was started by Nelson Goodman in the late 1960s to consider how the Arts might be incorporated into our schools to help students learn. David Perkins and Howard Gardner served as co-directors and together with a number of other talented researchers explored a number of different approaches to improve student learning."*

"This is what I always say when people ask: It's a research group at Harvard that formed back in the late sixties to study arts learning in a serious way. The reason it's called "Project Zero" is because back then, the founders believed that arts learning had only been explored in very limited ways, as expressions of emotion, essentially. The founding scholars saw the arts as symbol systems and arts learning as a cognitive and meaning-making process. And they thought they were at ground zero in terms of building knowledge based on this approach, hence the name."

The topics of art and creativity are also listed among other disciplines explored by Project Zero research:

"Project Zero, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is an educational organization that houses many different projects. They bridge theory and practice to strengthen educational innovations like project-based learning and portfolio assessment as well as education in the arts, disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies, civics, and much more…"

"Project Zero is an organization that is curious about the creative potential of human beings, through interdisciplinary work in the arts, education, and ethics."

"Project Zero is an umbrella organization at HGSE that houses many different research initiatives. The work is grounded in education and touches on many different themes including art, civics and citizenship, ethics, leadership, cognition, and more."

Other Categories of Response

A number of other categories emerged from this set of responses, including:

- Human intelligence, cognition, thinking – 25%
- Collaborate with schools, museums, other institutions for application, scaling, adaptation – 22%
- Human/child development – 18%
- Other (included mentions of leadership, development of tools and frameworks, emphasis on children, action based) – 18%
- "Great place to work", Community – 16%
- Ethical/Social good – 13%
- Global and cultural understanding – 9%
- Citizenship/Civics – 8%
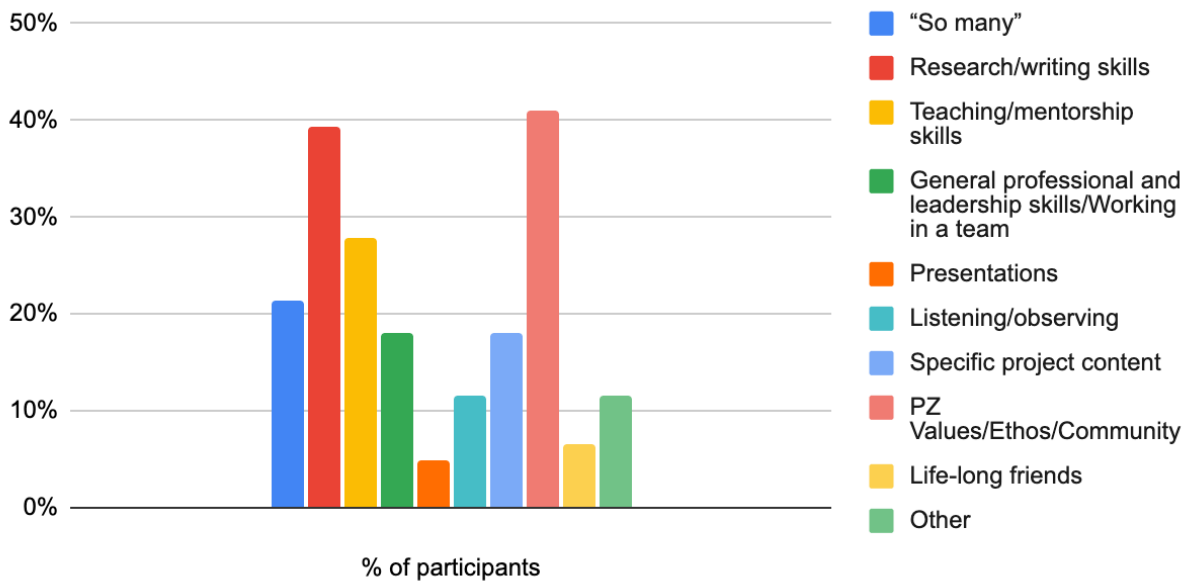- Learning and growth as a PZ member – 8%

- "Interdisciplinary" – 8%
- Digital learning/technology – 3%

What experiences from your time at Project Zero, if any, do you still think back to or have you applied to your life since? (Former staff members only)

We asked former staff members to identify the experiences from Project Zero that they still think back on or have applied to their lives. Participants described various ways in which PZ had an influence on their current work, personal growth, and outlook on the world more generally.

The top category for this question was *PZ Values/Ethos/Community* (41% of all responses). This was followed by *Research/Writing Skills* (39%) and *Teaching/Mentorship Skills* (28%).

What experiences from your time at Project Zero, if any, do you still think back to or have you applied to your life since?

Legend:
- "So many"
- Research/writing skills
- Teaching/mentorship skills
- General professional and leadership skills/Working in a team
- Presentations
- Listening/observing
- Specific project content
- PZ Values/Ethos/Community
- Life-long friends
- Other

% of participants

PZ Values, Ethos, and Community

Over a third (41%) of participants described ways in which Project Zero's values, ethos, and/or community influenced their work and lives. Responses in this category varied;

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some participants spoke about carrying forward specific PZ values, while others discussed the ethos of the organization more generally.

For instance, one participant pointed to the underlying values of the Good Work Project:

> *"I think back to conversations with colleagues, PZ Institute, and the values and ideas of the Good Work Project. I strive to incorporate intellectual liveliness into my life now, and think regularly about what "Good Work" means in my current context - or in "our" current context."*

Other former PZers brought up the unique culture of the organization, sometimes highlighting the fact that it was difficult to find a similar type of environment elsewhere:

> *"… I think the culture of the organization is a model for workplaces and did not find that in many other settings where I worked, but it set the bar high."*

> *"Although most employers I've encountered since PZ don't like to think so broadly and across disciplines that much, that urge still exists within me, and I hope to be able to apply somewhere in my professional life at some point."*

Project Zero was also described by several participants as an intellectually stimulating community in which employees were pushed to come up with bold ideas:

> *"There was a unique intensity there: Dedication to ideas, reflection, and sharing. That rare combination generated an energy which I continue to seek; but since leaving, I have experienced only at the spectacular PZ 50th birthday celebration, during sessions and while viewing the artistic displays in Gutman. Those who have never been part of PZ can gain a sense of that intellectual excitement in 'A Synthesizing Mind.'"*

> *"A sense of agency to develop big ideas and pursue them in collaboration with partners."*

> *"... after over 20 years away from PZ, I strive to create for my doc students the incredibly generative intellectual community I found there."*

> *"… the way the community was built, listening to all voices, being rigorous with ideas."*

Interestingly, two former employees brought up how PZ provided them with a positive environment for their first work experiences:

> *"Too many to count, but since it was my first 'real job' out of school, it was professionally very formative for me. As I said, it's a wonderful work environment filled with trust and mutual respect that I didn't realize was so rare when I worked there."*

> *"As my first 'real job,' I think it was formative in modeling good leadership and collaboration."*

Research and Writing Skills

A handful (39%) of former employees also expressed that they developed valuable research and writing skills at Project Zero. Perhaps unsurprisingly, several participants listed several specific skills that they gained as an employee, from developing a research question to writing an academic paper:

> *"How to craft a question for research, how to think creatively, how to listen and observe and question...."*

> *"Academic research and writing, as well as professional writing and presentations."*

> *"… excellent qualitative research skills learned from Denny."*

> *"Writing academic research papers for the first time and understanding what evidence and a good argument required; applying to educational conferences for the first time and learning what a 'good proposal' would look like; witnessing and thinking about how to support and carry out productive work (including facilitating meetings, productive work sessions); being aware of and highly sensitive to the role of a researcher in a school. All those were 'firsts' for me in my career."*

> *"As I wrote earlier, being a part of such a rich research team is very rewarding. It taught me a way of thinking and of approaching problems."*

Other former employees spoke about how Project Zero was influential to their growth as a researcher more generally:

"PZ started me on the journey to becoming a researcher. I look at everything with a researcher's eye. It also taught me to respect the work of and to trust the voice of educators. I am indebted to PZ for the opportunities it gave me in organizing professional development opportunities for educators."

"If I have to name a few I would say working on teams toward a goal and developing a 'research mentality' stand out from my work on projects. The thing that stands out most to me when working as an artist is that at PZ I started to talk to myself – not out loud of course, but I do seem to have developed a small voice in my head that talks to me about my work and as I work. Of course lots changes as I work – envisioning and reflection only go so far – but the voice is still there. But that's a good thing."

One participant described how she initially lamented the "extended discussion of ideas" at Project Zero, but later found it to be influential in her career:

"Sometimes I found the extended discussion of ideas that characterized my time at PZ a bit frustrating, but in the time since I miss the seriousness and openness with which people explore and test ideas. I try to apply this in my teaching and research."

Teaching and Mentorship Skills

Over a quarter (28%) of former employees described teaching and mentorship skills as a meaningful takeaway from their time at Project Zero. A few participants pointed to the valuable lessons that they learned from specific individuals at Project Zero that they saw as mentors:

"I've told Howard that he was my best boss ever – I've always tried to be a 'warm demander' as he was. I aspire to be as good as he is about responding to every email and as gracious as a colleague."

"When trying to avoid admitting to complete failure I still quote Tom Hatch who, when asked by the funders about the first year of the Afterschool Project, said 'No one was hurt.'"

"Seeing Howard in action every day handling situations – particularly in how he handled people with a combination of directness, persistence, honesty, tact, etc.

– very much applies to how I do so today. If I took nothing else away from my time at PZ, those lessons alone were 'worth the price of admission.'"

Some participants who described mentors at Project Zero connected their learnings to the ways in which they mentor their own students:

"My mentor at Project Zero taught me important lessons on how to mentor my own students. I'm constantly thinking back to that experience to become a better mentor to my students..."

"Learning from mentors who welcomed new ideas and supported the development of fledgling researchers. I think I carried that on with the graduate students and research assistant with whom I have been privileged to work."

A handful of former employees who work as teachers described how experiences at Project Zero have informed the ways in which they engage with students in class. A few of these participants referenced specific project content from PZ that they now incorporate into classes. For instance:

"I teach an Educational Research class. In it, I incorporate skills and lessons that I learned from working on Dr. Mindy Kornhaber's Schools Using Multiple Intelligences Theory. In my Assessment and Analysis course, I teach my students about Visible Thinking Routines, Teaching for Understanding, and Multiple Intelligences Theory."

"I still use the Ladder of Feedback in my teaching and professional development work all the time (and also at home with mixed results). I still teach about MI theory and use the Naming of Parts poem activity I stole from Tina Blythe et al. I still post one of my favorite sayings from Dave on the board every time I teach: 'Learning is a consequence of thinking.'"

Other Categories

In addition to the top categories, the following themes were also raised by participants:

- "So many" – 21%
- Specific project content (e.g., MI theory, Good Work, Teaching for Understanding, Lec-Dem logic) – 18%
- General professional skills and working in a team – 18%

- Listening and observing – 11%
- Other (e.g., specific routines and protocols, sent kids to Reggio Emilia preschool) – 11%
- Life-long friends – 7%
- Presentations – 5%

<u>Concluding Notes</u>

We are very pleased to have had the opportunity to carry out the survey and to report the results. A large number of individuals have spent their adult working lives at Project Zero—a few for a half century, many for several decades. In that sense, the organization has had considerable continuity. At the same time, the organization has also changed in many respects—foci of research, management structure, relation to Harvard, types and sources of funding, and—not least—the number of different sites on campus where Project Zero has been housed!

We are delighted at the high number of responses—both among current members, and among those who worked at Project Zero in the past. We are equally delighted that the reflections on Project Zero are overwhelmingly positive; and that an great majority of respondents said that they would be willing to be interviewed. Of course, those who are <u>not</u> happy with their Project Zero experiences would have been less likely to respond—though of course, the response would give them an opportunity to list their grievances.

Some of the findings could readily have been anticipated. It's not surprising that Project Zero is described as an educational research center or think tank. And it is also not surprising—though it is reassuring—that Project Zero respondents value gatherings—team meetings, workshops, off-site visits, and especially the long-running Summer Institute. With the pandemic, these in-person encounters have been less easy to carry out, and so current members valorize research and writing, which can more easily be carried out remotely.

Of course, we were interested in aspects of Project Zero that could or should be changed or improved. Not surprisingly, the lack of financial stability led the list—though a few pointed out that having to raise funds for salaries and research costs does keep one on the alert. This response was less frequent from members who were at HPZ in the "golden era"—when there was ten years of unrestricted support from the Atlantic Philanthropies—once known as the AF (for Anonymous Funder).

For most of its history Project Zero has not been demographically diverse. And so, it's not surprising that current members call for greater diversity—particularly in

demographic terms, but also in terms of disciplinary foci and country of origin. It's appropriate that, in recent years, this lack of diversity has been a major preoccupation of the leadership team.

A recurring theme—though one less easy to articulate—is the atmosphere at Project Zero—a combination of talking, discussing, processing, arguing, researching, and writing; a concern with the minutiae of research but also the big questions; responsible mentoring, ranging from the training of specific skills to the ways in which "old-timers" navigate the landscape of research, fund raising, relation to the University, and to one's close colleagues. As the founding generation disappears from the scene, it will be instructive to note how and in what ways the "organizational ethos" changes. Perhaps, a few decades from now, it will be worthwhile repeating this survey—no doubt using the technology and terminology of that day.

Appendix: Accounts of PZ History and Work

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