

NAVIGATING ISSUES OF EQUITY IN SCHOOLS THROUGH RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS

Stories From the Field



EDITED BY
JESSE SENECHAL, DAVID NAFF,
AND HILLARY PARKHOUSE



Navigating Issues of Equity in Schools Through Research-Practice Partnerships

This book provides a wealth of rich cases describing how research-practice partnerships (RPPs) in K-12 schools navigate equity in the design and implementation of their projects and shares insightful recommendations for both research-side and practice-side RPP leaders engaged in this work. Chapter authors from both researcher and practitioner communities unpack real examples that illustrate how RPPs conceptualized, conducted, and shared research related to prominent equity challenges in K-12 schools. Chapters also detail specific tensions and challenges—political, methodological, relational—and how to overcome these. Presenting an equity-focused RPP framework, this important volume explores how to cultivate trusting and equitable relationships among partners, prioritize humanity and equity in the identification and articulation of a RPP project topic, center equity goals, and align methodological approaches to equity objectives. This important resource helps aspiring, new, and veteran RPP leaders initiate projects or partner with new collaborators as they develop trusting relationships within university and school settings in order to conduct impactful, equity-oriented research.

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**Edited by
Jesse Senechal, David Naff, and
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Contents

List of Contributors
Preface

viii
xvii

PART 1

Introduction and Frame

1

1 Navigating Issues of Equity in Schools Through Research-Practice Partnerships

3

JESSE SENECHAL, HILLARY PARKHOUSE, AND DAVID NAFF

2 Practice-Side Tensions and Tradeoffs When Coproducing Research: Mind the Thorns

17

NORMA MING AND SARAH DICKSON

PART 2

The Case Studies: Theme 1: Navigating Partnerships and Relationships

37

3 Centering Equitable Relationships in a Young Research-Practice Partnership: Design Features and Dilemmas

39

MARCY SINGER-GABELLA, CAROLINE MARKS, KRISTA DAVIS,
NÉCOLE ELIZER, JAMIE KLINENBERG, AND CHANGHEE LEE

4 Cultivating a Mutualistic Partnership for Inquiry

54

DIVYA VARIER, DEBORAH CRAWFORD, COURTNEY BAKER,
AND JOHNNA BOLYARD



5	Sustaining a Research-Practice Partnership While Addressing Disproportionality in School Discipline	70
	DAVID NAFF, BRIAN MALTBY, WILLIAM NOEL, AND TAMESHIA GRIMES	
	Theme 2: Equity in Project Design and Implementation	83
6	A Research Practice Partnership to Accelerate Learning in Kent, WA, School District: In Search of Bright Spots	85
	RACHAEL WALDROP, ELIZABETH BARKER, BETH HOLLAND, ASHLEY BIRKELAND, AND VIOLET FORD	
7	The Value of Pivoting: Equity-Centered Lessons Learned in a Research-Practice Partnership Between Rural Districts and a Research-Focused Non-Profit	99
	MERIJKE COENRAAD, EMI IWATANI, KYLE DUNBAR, NEIL ARNETT, MIKE BELL, SARAH BLACKBURN, AMY NEWSOME, TRACI TACKETT, AND AILEEN OWENS	
	Theme 3: Centering Marginalized Voices and Community Engagement	117
8	Educational Equity Moves at the Speed of Trust: A Research Practice Partnership to Support Black Students' Postsecondary Pathways	119
	ESOHE OSAI, SHANYCE L. CAMPBELL, JACKIE SPIEZIA, ANGELA FLANGO, AND JAMES FOGARTY	
9	Expanding Conceptions of Equity from Network Practice to the Research Process	134
	KEMI ANIKE OYEWOLE AND EVE ARBOGAST	
10	Engaging Historically Marginalized Students and Families in School Improvement Processes: Insights From a University-District-Nonprofit RPP	147
	ARIEL TICHNOR-WAGNER, ELIZABETH A. BARCAY, ROHAN ARCOT, HARDIN COLEMAN, AND ALIA VERNER	

Theme 4: Navigating Contextual Factors and Systems	163
11 Looking at Equity Through the Rearview Mirror: Reflections From an RPP Project Focused on Well-Being of Educators in a Rural School District	165
ISELA PEÑA, RODOLFO RINCONES, HOLLY FIELDS, JEANNIE MEZA-CHAVEZ, AND ROGELIO SEGOVIA	
12 Building an RPP With Equity in Mind: Delaware Early Literacy Research-Practice Partnership	181
ANNASTASIA PURINTON, ELIZABETH FARLEY-RIPPLE, KATHY KELLY, PAIGE MORGAN, MONICA GANT, NERMIN ZUBACA, JASON HUSTEDT, ANAMARIE WHITAKER, AND STEVEN AMENDUM	
13 Navigating and Transforming PK12 Systems Through Research-Practice Partnerships	196
MAIA ELKANA, RACHEL RUGGIRELLO, JAY HARTMAN, NIKKI DOUGHTY, AND VICTORIA MAY	
PART 3	
Final Thoughts	209
14 Emboldening Present and Future RPP Leaders: Pursuing Equity in Politically Charged Times	211
HILLARY PARKHOUSE, JESSE SENECHAL, AND DAVID NAFF	
<i>Index</i>	222



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Preface

Like many research-practice partnerships (RPPs) across the country, our work at Virginia Commonwealth University has focused on some of the most complex challenges facing public education. This includes studies of teacher retention, school discipline, access to advanced coursework, professional development for culturally responsive education, and student mental health. The challenges faced in these areas inevitably surface issues of equity. They are challenges because the experiences of students, teachers, schools, and communities consistently vary across lines of power and social identity. In designing and executing collaborative research studies with our partnering school districts, our goal has not only been to offer insights about how local data and experiences reflect state and national trends but also to support professional learning and to build capacity within our RPP for transforming the systems of education toward equity. However, doing so involves navigating tensions that naturally emerge when conducting studies that shed a critical light on existing inequities. This has required both research- and practice-side partners to lean on the longstanding trusting relationships that facilitated the research from the onset. Through this work, we have wondered how other RPPs have traversed these same dynamics while remaining committed to the relationship at the center of the partnership.

Naturally, when this question emerged, our first step was to reach out to the broader community of RPPs participating in the National Network of Education Research Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) at the Kinder Institute at Rice University. NNERPP helped us facilitate a series of conversations with the RPP community that led to the idea for this edited volume. NNERPP not only provided a forum for the conversations that shaped this book's framework but also generously funded this as an open access publication, ensuring these insights would be freely available to all RPP stakeholders. We would especially like to thank Paula Arce-Trigatti for her insightful feedback on our initial ideas and ongoing encouragement and support throughout the duration of this book project.



The purpose of this book is to provide a framework and set of case studies to support RPP leaders in designing and implementing equity-focused research projects, particularly within our current sociopolitical context. Drawing on examples from RPPs across the country, the book considers how partnerships navigate the complexities of centering equity while maintaining strong collaborative relationships. The book is organized in three parts. Part 1 (Chapters 1–2) provides the conceptual foundation, introducing our Equity in RPP Design Framework and examining critical insights about the costs and challenges practitioners face in these partnerships. Part 2 presents twelve case studies organized into four themes: navigating partnerships and relationships, equity in project design and implementation, centering marginalized voices and community engagement, and navigating contextual factors and systems. Each case illustrates how different RPPs have applied elements of the framework in their specific contexts. Part 3 (Chapter 14) synthesizes key insights and lessons learned across the cases.

This collection is designed for multiple audiences. For current RPP leaders from both research and practice sides, it offers strategies and examples for navigating equity-focused work. For emerging scholars and practitioners interested in RPP work, it provides an introduction to key principles and challenges. The book can also serve as a text in graduate courses on collaborative research methods or partnerships in education. To support reflection and application, each case study chapter includes discussion questions that connect the specific example to elements of the framework. These questions are designed to facilitate both individual learning and group discussion in professional development or classroom settings. As an open access publication supported by NNERPP, this book aims to make these insights freely available to all RPP stakeholders. Our hope is that it serves as both a practical resource for RPP design and a contribution to broader conversations about advancing educational equity through research-practice partnerships.

This is the book that we wished we had to guide our path over the past several years, and the process of putting it together has been both enriching and enlightening. What we have found in curating this collection is that there is a broad and diverse community of both research and practice partners who are not only committed to tackling the persistent challenges in public PK12 education through partnership work but who also understand the importance of a strong equity focus in this work. This project has also further reinforced our belief that RPPs are well positioned to be a catalyst for the equitable transformation of our educational systems. We encourage you to explore and share this open access resource with other RPP stakeholders. Our hope is that this book serves as a contribution to the ongoing conversation within the field and supports the development of the next generation of RPP leaders.



Part 1

Introduction and Frame



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Navigating Issues of Equity in Schools Through Research-Practice Partnerships

*Jesse Senechal, Hillary Parkhouse,
and David Naff*

In the summer of 2020, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery prompted long-overdue conversations about perpetual racial injustice around the world. At that time, a team within our research-practice partnership (RPP) was leading a study on the design, implementation, and outcomes of teacher professional development (PD) supporting culturally responsive education. This study was an extension of prior work, commissioned by the partnership, to understand the professional development needs of teachers in the midst of significant demographic changes in our region. Our project included high levels of engagement not just from university-based researchers and graduate students but also central office personnel, school-level administrators, and classroom teachers. Among our university-based team, there was a consensus that the shifting sociopolitical context during 2020 had significant implications for our work. Although the PD had always involved discussions of racial oppression and our positionalities within systems of power, we recognized that these discussions needed to be intensified and forefronted. The teacher participants in the study and our district-level collaborators, despite still reeling from the dramatic instructional changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, were also eager to dive more deeply into these issues. In partnership, we moved ahead with the assurance that the research and practice sides of the partnership maintained shared goals and a shared language of equity.

Much can change in a year. Starting in the 2021–22 school year, the national backlash against racial equity work in schools and a shift in state-level political power put pressure on the partnership. Upon taking office, the governor of our state issued an executive order banning the teaching of “divisive concepts,” including curricula that acknowledged systemic racism. On the university side, there were mixed messages. Within the university there were calls among faculty and some leadership to make a strong public statement against the anti-equity efforts; however, as a state institution, the university’s central leadership was cautious about its messaging. Within our PK12 partner districts, similar tensions existed.

School board meetings became a central battleground for these debates, and equity-focused teacher professional development became a particular target. Although the teachers and many central office leaders were still passionate about moving forward with equity-centered efforts, we all found ourselves caught between the political backlash and our moral commitments to work for racial justice. Our attempts to maintain shared goals and equity language were endangered by sociopolitical contexts at the national and local levels that were beyond our control.

This vignette is just one example of the types of challenges we have faced within our RPP amidst the recent political shifts in education. In the years prior to 2020, our partnership had initiated a series of studies guided by questions of equity posed by member school districts. In addition to the professional development study mentioned previously, we also led studies on racial disproportionality in school discipline (see Chapter 5 in this volume) and equitable access and support for advanced coursework. While the findings of these projects often challenged existing school policies and practices, we moved forward with confidence that the design of our projects shielded us from the tensions that can occur when issues of educational equity are explored. Like many RPPs, our studies are collaborative efforts involving high levels of communication and shared decision making across multiple phases of the work. Our district partners are highly engaged not only in the selection of research topics and goals but also in the development of methods, the data collection and analysis processes, and the communication of research findings. As an RPP, we felt comfortable tackling politically challenging topics because we were doing this in partnership. And yet, as highlighted in the vignette, the events of recent years have put significant pressure on our work and led us to rethink the way we design and enact our research studies.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The purpose of this book is to present a framework that centers the principle of equity and supports decision making through the design and implementation of RPP projects, with a recognition of the challenges this work entails. To support the application of this framework to practice, the book also shares a series of case examples from RPPs that have navigated the challenges and tensions that often occur when doing equity-focused work. The cases, which were solicited through a call for chapters distributed by the National Network of Education Research Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), include examples of RPP projects from across geographic regions, addressing a range of topics and using varied methods. The cases also represent a variety of RPP structures and configurations. While some of the RPPs are traditional university-school district partnerships, others involve state-level education agencies or non-university affiliated research organizations. There is also variance in the authors, with significant contributions from both the practice side and research side of the RPP community.

There are two reasons that we believe there is value in this effort. First, the goal of the book is in line with a general movement in the field of RPPs to elevate the principle of equity. This is evident in the recent “State of the Field” RPP definition put forward by the WT Grant Foundation (Farrell et al., 2021) and is connected to larger conversations across education on the importance of equity, as well as increased societal awareness of racial injustice.

Considering the rapidly changing sociopolitical context around PK12 schools and higher education, there is also an urgency to this work. There is mounting evidence that the anti-equity backlash illustrated in the vignette represents only part of a much broader attack on public education. Between January 2021 and August 2024, measures restricting discussions on racism and sexism were introduced in 44 states, with 18 states enacting such measures (Schwartz, 2024). Even in states without explicit prohibitions, numerous districts and schools have scaled back their efforts towards anti-racism to sidestep potential parental opposition. Consequently, educators have grown hesitant to broach topics concerning race or diversity. This era has been referred to by PEN America as the “ed scare,” in part because the ambiguous language in these policies leads educators to avoid content and instruction that might be in violation (Meehan & Friedman, 2023).

In certain states, parallel efforts have targeted higher education. For example, Florida’s Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (Stop WOKE) Act restricts the teaching of systemic racism not just across PK12 but also public universities and workplaces. In March 2024, the University of Florida eliminated its chief diversity office position, terminated 13 staff contracts, and removed the administrative appointments of 15 faculty members working in the diversity office. In addition, \$5 million budgeted for diversity programs were reallocated to faculty recruitment efforts. All colleges and universities across Florida are expected to follow suit in compliance with the new law, and Republican-led legislatures around the nation are advocating for similar legislation (The Associated Press, 2024). In states with such legislation, equity-focused RPPs with university members will become increasingly difficult to initiate or sustain.

Although schools and colleges have always been a battleground for conflicting ideologies, our current moment stands apart in the scale of these sweeping censorship efforts. This compounds common challenges that RPPs face, including honoring the perspectives of different stakeholder groups and promoting research use in practitioner settings that may or may not be receptive to the findings (Goldstein et al., 2019). As we come to accept this as the new normal of public education, the RPP field must consider its role in supporting equitable education systems and develop strategies for navigating this new political context.

The second reason we believe there is value in this effort is that there has been a call within the field of RPP scholarship to develop a plan for “cultivating the next generation of RPP leaders to develop the range of skills, knowledge, dispositions, and orientations needed to engage in partnership efforts” (Farrell et al., 2021).

Some tools and resources toward this end have recently been shared through organizations such as the W.T. Grant Foundation and NNERPP (for example, see Wentworth et al., 2021). Our book is intended as a contribution to this effort.

We chose case studies as the vehicle for telling these stories because they are in-depth examinations that illustrate the complexities of context. Flyvbjerg (2006) proposed that “the case study produces the type of context-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts” (p. 221). This is because, to achieve expertise, one must move beyond the mere application of principles to the sophisticated judgment that can only be attained through “intimate knowledge of several thousand concrete cases” (p. 222). Although such expert knowledge is only acquired through deep personal experience, the next-best avenue is to learn from others’ experiences. Our hope is that the 12 case studies presented in this book provide rich descriptions that will allow readers to consider the principles of equitable RPP design in action. To encourage this type of reflection, we have included questions at the end of each case study chapter that highlight the relationship between the dynamics of the case example and the framework presented later in this chapter. Our goal is for this book to serve as a support for the professional learning of current and future RPP project leaders from both the research and practice sides and to contribute to the scholarship on research design within RPPs and collaborative research more broadly.

In the remainder of this chapter, we explore the idea of educational equity specifically within the field of RPPs. We begin by considering how equity emerged as a central principle of RPPs over the past decade, highlighting the ways it has influenced thinking about both the design and practice of RPP efforts. This is followed by a presentation of our Equity in RPP Design Framework both as a visual model and through a descriptive walkthrough of the central elements. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the structure of the book.

THE EMERGENCE OF EQUITY AS A CENTRAL PRINCIPLE OF RPPs

While in the previous discussion we highlight the current backlash against equity in education, it is worth remembering that equity was once a bipartisan principle (Au, 2011). For example, the language of equity has been central to the policy logic of federal law since the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which required school districts to report student achievement by subgroup to ensure all students in grades 3–8 attained proficiency in math and reading. Although the means through which NCLB, and later Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), attempted to achieve that goal often turned out to exacerbate rather than alleviate inequities (Au, 2011), the rhetorical commitment of the educational establishment, through both Republican and Democratic administrations, was clearly

equity focused. In this regard, the current backlash against the idea of equity is a fundamental challenge to that commitment.

While definitions of equity may vary, they typically include phrases like *fairness*, *justice*, and *impartiality* and are distinguished from *equality*, which refers to having the same amount or quality of something across groups or individuals. The principle of equity often acknowledges the positionality of individuals and groups within social, political, and cultural systems of power. This framing is reflected in a recent definition presented as part of a discussion of equity in RPPs. The authors suggest that equity in education means:

[A]llocating resources appropriately so every child has access to the supports, resources, and opportunities needed to be successful and thrive. Beyond this, equity ensures that resources are tailored to meet individual needs, build on the cultural assets of students, and are designed in such a way that all students have the opportunity to achieve their maximum potential.

(Henrick et al., 2019)

To understand the equity dimensions of RPP work, it is helpful to consider how thinking about equity in the RPP community has evolved. An important milestone occurred in 2013 with the publication of a white paper that aligned several distinct models of collaborative university PK12 research (i.e., *design research*, *networked improvement communities*, and *research alliances*), under the banner of research-practice partnership (Coburn et al., 2013). The authors argued that these three models, while distinct, shared common design principles that positioned them at the boundaries of the traditional education research paradigm. What made the RPP approach distinct, they suggested, was the reframing and explicit attention to the development of research relationships within RPPs and the focus of the work on identifying and collaboratively solving local problems of practice. Although the word “equity” was not explicitly referenced in this initial framing, the work presented a clear challenge to the traditional power dynamics of educational research and implied the idea of egalitarian relationships. This is evident as the authors outlined the distinct challenges of RPP work and possible strategies for addressing them. These include the challenges of relationships (e.g., “bridging the different cultural worlds of researchers and practitioners” and “developing and maintaining trust”), the challenges of organizational alignment (e.g., “meeting district timelines” and “aligning with academic norms and incentives”), and challenges of design (e.g., “balancing local relevance with scalability”) (Coburn et al., 2013, pp. 14–19). The focus on the egalitarian structure of RPPs is also evident in the elevation of the idea of “mutualism,” which suggests not only shared authority and equitable relationships but also mutual benefit from the joint work.

The ideas reflected in this early definition of RPPs gained momentum in the years that followed and were accompanied by significant growth in the RPP

community and RPP scholarship. This expansion of the field also led to a broadening discussion around equity. For example, while the 2013 definition encouraged the reconceptualization of the traditional power dynamics embedded in the enterprise of educational research, RPP leaders increasingly emphasized the importance of diversifying the voices included in RPP projects and shifting power relationships in more radical ways. In 2015, Penuel et al. (2015) introduced the concepts of “boundary crossing” and “boundary practices,” which highlighted the complexities of navigating institutional and cultural contexts in research, and emphasized “joint work” that goes beyond simple collaboration. This laid the groundwork for more nuanced discussions of power-sharing in RPPs. This shift in understanding was also evident in emerging discussions of RPP goals. For example, Henrick et al. (2019) center the role of RPPs in promoting equity. They write,

RPPs can design research that addresses equity issues via methods such as documenting opportunities to learn and assessing and making use of data on student experiences in classrooms and other educational settings. This approach includes using theoretical lenses to explicitly examine equity and social justice, in order to better illuminate sources of inequity.

(p. 10)

The evidence of this move is further illustrated by the influential “State of the Field” paper (Farrell et al., 2021), published as an update to the 2013 RPP definition. A key point in the updated definition is a turn away from the idea of “mutualism.” The authors wrote that “mutualism” had been replaced by a more explicit focus on “power sharing and transforming relationships among researchers, practitioners” and established “educational improvement or equitable transformation” as the primary aim of the RPP model (Farrell et al., 2021, p. 6). However, even with this, some argued that educational improvement and equitable transformation should not be presented as an either/or choice but rather as a both/and imperative (Vetter et al., 2022).

The explicit focus on equity as a central principle of RPPs has continued to develop in recent scholarship. In 2022, Farrell et al. presented a framework for understanding the various ways RPPs conceptualize equity, distinguishing between “equity-in-mission” (focused on the goals and focus of the RPP’s work) and “equity-in-process” (how equity is enacted in the RPP’s collaborative practices). This work highlights the range of equity conceptions in RPPs, from more dominant to more critical orientations. Building on this idea, Yamashiro et al. (2023) emphasize the political nature of equity work by situating RPPs within the broader sociopolitical contexts and proposing a more dynamic model for understanding how RPPs navigate equity issues. This shift towards a more nuanced understanding of equity in RPPs is also evident in the recent update to the RPP

Health and Effectiveness Framework (Henrick et al., 2023). The revised framework now includes “explicit attention to equity, voice, privilege, and power across all dimensions and their indicators” (p. 4). These changes reflect a growing recognition in the field of the importance of equity and represent a clear ideological movement in the field.

However, using the lenses of equity in RPP work presents significant challenges. Especially in the current polarized political context, beliefs about equity can vary significantly both between and within RPP contexts. For example, in a study of district administrators’ implementation of equity-focused school funding policies, Allbright et al. (2019) found that conceptions of equity varied in ways that had significant implications for the understanding of the system (more and less critical) and implementation of policy. When this happens, the use of equity lenses by researchers may be at odds with district framing. Employing equity lenses that highlight systemic injustice can lead to research that is politically unpalatable from a school district perspective. As Diamond (2021) suggests, this work could push RPPs to avoid engagement with critical perspectives or avoid equity topics altogether. In this way, RPPs can end up defining equity in terms of its least common—most palatable, least critical—denominator. This could result in an ideology gap between the R and P sides, adding a fourth type of gap to the list that until now included the knowledge gap, design gap, and context gap (Wentworth et al., 2021). Although prior literature has described how RPPs can address the latter three gaps, more work is needed to understand how RPPs, especially those focused on equity, might address the ideology gap.

THE EQUITY IN RPP DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Considering the current anti-equity political pressures on education, the potential for misalignment and retreat from critical framing of equity is higher than ever. The framework presented in this section was developed as a tool to support equity-focused decision making in the design and implementation of RPP projects in the face of these challenges. It was informed by the literature on equity within RPPs, some of which is cited previously, as well as reflective discussions among the book editors related to equity-focused projects we have led over the last ten years within a longstanding RPP between Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Education and school districts in metropolitan Richmond, Virginia. The framework was then refined through presentations and workshop discussions within the NNERPP community. In this section we will provide a walk-through of the elements of the framework and explain how this tool might be used by RPP leaders.

Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation of the key elements that influence equity within RPP projects between universities and PK12 schools and districts.¹ At its broadest level, represented by the outermost circle, the framework



Figure 1.1 Equity in RPP Design Framework

encompasses the entire RPP project. Within this project space, there are five key design elements that represent areas where project leaders can make intentional decisions to center equity. These elements are also interactive (signified by two-way arrows), meaning decisions in one area may influence decisions in another, as well as dynamic, in that the processes it seeks to illustrate are iterative and ongoing over the life of a project.

At the center of the figure is Equitable RPP Relationships. This central placement emphasizes the idea that relationships between partners are fundamental to the success of equity-focused RPP work. The inner circle contains three categories of partners—Research Side Partners, School and District Partners, and Community Partners—highlighting the diverse stakeholders involved in these collaborative efforts. It’s important to note that each of these stakeholder groups is complex and diverse in itself. For example, within the PK12 district or the research institution, there can be significant variations in power and perspectives among individuals. The category of community partners also requires special attention, as it includes caregivers, students, and other community members who often have the most significant stake in the research but typically wield the least influence in traditional research paradigms.

The decisions made about relationships at the onset of a project form the foundation of an RPP project and have profound implications for the project’s direction and outcomes. The choices in this area define who is “at the table,” and this space becomes the locus of decision-making in the other areas of design. It’s crucial to recognize that the characteristics and qualities of RPP relationships are

not static. They can evolve over the course of a project, necessitating consistent attention and nurturing.

Moving outward from the center, we encounter a second element: the Shared Language of Equity. As mentioned, the definition of equity can vary significantly not only between but also within the constituent partnering organizations (Allbright et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2023). For this reason, it is critical that RPP project leaders find a shared language of equity to guide the work. A shared language of equity has implications for the theories and frameworks used to guide the work. Developing this shared language often requires thoughtful negotiation and ongoing dialogue among partners. This process of developing a shared language can itself be a valuable opportunity for partners to deepen their understanding of equity and strengthen their collaborative relationships.

The next design element is Equity in Topic. All RPP projects address some persistent problem of practice; however, the degree to which the topic explicitly addresses issues of equity can vary significantly. Some topics may directly raise equity issues, such as racial disparities in disciplinary practices, while others might focus on broader educational challenges where equity considerations are important but not the primary focus. The topic of a project defines the boundaries of the inquiry and shapes the trajectory of the research. When a partnership chooses a topic, they are making important decisions about which issues will receive attention and resources and which may be left unexamined.

The fourth design element is Equity in Project Goals. It's important to recognize that RPP projects can vary widely in their goals and objectives. Some projects primarily focus on the production of knowledge; others involve designing, piloting, or scaling educational interventions, with the intention of directly impacting practice; still others might have process-oriented goals, such as enhancing community engagement or building capacity within partnering organizations. In any case, these goals can be more or less explicitly focused on addressing educational inequities. For example, a knowledge-production project could aim to understand the root causes of achievement gaps, while a project with community-building goals might aim to elevate traditionally underrepresented voices in educational decision-making processes. Moreover, it's crucial to consider potential tensions or trade-offs between goals. For example, a goal of rapidly scaling an intervention might conflict with a goal of ensuring equitable participation in the design process. RPP leaders need to navigate these goal tensions thoughtfully, always keeping equity at the forefront of their decision-making.

The final RPP design element in our framework is Equity in Method. Decisions about research methods encompass a wide range of choices, including approaches to data collection, data analysis, and participant selection. These methodological decisions are crucial, as they determine whose voices are heard, how information is interpreted, and ultimately, what knowledge is produced. It's important to note that equity-focused research studies can employ a wide range of methods,

from quantitative approaches like statistical analyses of large datasets to qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic observations. The key is not necessarily the type of method used but how it is applied with equity considerations in mind.

In Table 1.1, we present guiding questions for RPP leaders as they consider each of the five design elements represented in the framework. These questions could be raised at strategic points in the design process and through implementation.

The framework also acknowledges important contextual factors that influence RPP work. These factors, represented in black text on the bottom periphery of the outer circle, are generally outside the direct control of the RPP project team but may constrain or enable the ability of a project team to center equity in design. The framework identifies three categories of contextual factors:

- **Research System Context:** This refers to the institutional environment of the research partners. For example, a university’s promotion and tenure policies can significantly impact a faculty member’s ability to engage

Table 1.1 Questions to support equity-focused RPP project design

Equitable RPP Relationships	Who are the key stakeholders involved from the research, practice, and community sides? What is the positionality and the diversity of the perspectives represented? How is trust built and maintained among partners? What structures and processes ensure equity in voice and decision-making power within and across the groups?
Shared Language of Equity	How do partners collaboratively conceptualize equity? What theoretical frameworks guide conversations of equity issues? How do the definitions of equity center the experiences of students, families, and communities?
Equity in Topic	How does this topic relate to existing educational inequities? What populations have historically been most affected by this issue? How are humanity and equity centered in the identification and development of the topic? How might addressing this topic contribute to greater educational equity?
Equity in Project Goals	To what extent do the goals explicitly address educational inequities? How do the goals balance knowledge production with direct impact and systems transformation? What potential tensions exist between the different project goals?
Equity in Method	How do the methods engage the voices and perspectives of diverse stakeholders throughout the research process? To what extent are the approaches collaborative, action oriented, and designed for transformation? What approaches are used to analyze inequities at individual and systemic levels?

in long-term relationship development, which is often crucial for equity-focused RPP work. Other factors might include funding structures, institutional priorities, or ethical review processes that shape the possibilities for collaborative research.

- **PK12 System Context:** This encompasses the policy, practice, and professional culture within the school district or education system. For instance, district policies on data sharing, professional development priorities, or the level of autonomy given to schools can all influence the design and implementation of RPP projects. The existing equity initiatives within the system and the receptiveness of district leadership to equity-focused work also play crucial roles.
- **Sociopolitical Context:** This factor acknowledges that RPPs operate within larger social and political dynamics. This might include national education policies, public discourse around equity in education, or local community attitudes towards research. As we discussed earlier, the current political climate surrounding equity work in schools can significantly influence the possibilities for RPP projects.

While RPP leaders may not have direct control over these contextual factors, understanding and navigating them is crucial for successful equity-focused work. RPP teams need to be aware of these factors, attend to how they shift over time, and develop strategies to work effectively within these contexts. Moreover, while these factors are generally considered outside the locus of control of RPP projects, RPP work may contribute, in incremental ways, to shifting these contexts, in essence working toward the “equitable transformation” suggested in the State of the Field paper (Farell et al., 2021).

TOUR OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into three parts. The first part of the book includes Chapters 1 and 2. We consider this the frame, as these chapters lay out the ideas and context that are foundational to the question of equity in RPP design. As a companion to the framework presented in this opening chapter, Chapter 2 offers critical insights from experienced practice-side RPP leaders about the costs and challenges practitioners face in these partnerships. This early inclusion of practitioner perspectives helps balance the university perspective that we, as book editors, bring and provides a counter perspective to the researcher-led narrative that often dominates RPP discussions.

Part 2 presents 11 case studies. The case study authors were provided this framework and asked to consider the design elements and contextual factors in relation to a specific project from their RPP. They were encouraged to tell a story that brought the elements of the framework to life. In this, we hope that

the framework and the case studies support reflection and learning about the opportunities and challenges of centering equity in partnership projects. We have organized the case studies into four thematic sections.

The first theme, navigating partnerships and relationships, explores how RPPs build and maintain equitable relationships across institutional and cultural boundaries. This section includes three chapters that explore the processes and strategies used to foster trust, collaboration, and shared decision-making among partners from diverse institutional and cultural backgrounds. The second theme, equity in project design and implementation, explores how RPPs conceptualize and operationalize equity through their research processes. This section includes two chapters that demonstrate various approaches to centering equity in research questions, methods, and dissemination strategies. Theme three, centering marginalized voices and community engagement, highlights RPP efforts to elevate and incorporate the voices and experiences of historically marginalized students, families, and communities in the research process. The three chapters in this section present innovative strategies for building trust, fostering authentic participation, and co-creating knowledge with communities that have often been excluded from educational research. The fourth and final theme, navigating contextual factors and systems, examines how RPPs operate within and potentially transform broader systems. The three chapters in this section demonstrate the complex interplay between RPPs and the contexts in which they operate. These cases offer insights into how partnerships can navigate systemic constraints, leverage opportunities for change, and work towards transforming educational systems.

Part 3 of the book consists of Chapter 14, the final chapter, which serves as a reflective synthesis of the key insights and lessons learned by the authors across the case studies. This chapter revisits the framework and outlines common themes across the case studies: the interplay of motivations and institutional logics, the challenges of differing standards of evidence and research funding constraints, the navigation of hierarchies and power dynamics, and the complexities of managing differing timelines between research and practice partners. The chapter also reflects on the rapidly evolving sociopolitical context surrounding equity work in education, offering insights into how RPPs can adapt and persevere in the face of these emerging challenges.

NOTE

- 1 We recognize that education-focused RPPs are not always university/PK12 partnerships. There are RPPs that involve partnership with state education agencies as the practice partner or, in other cases, RPPs led by non-university based research organizations. In these cases, the dynamics of the model may operate differently, although we believe that it still holds relevance. Some of the case studies in this book represent these alternative configurations.

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Practice-Side Tensions and Tradeoffs When Coproducing Research

Mind the Thorns

Norma Ming and Sarah Dickson

Across education, health, social services, and related fields, interest in collaboratively producing research with practitioners and the public has been growing. These efforts encompass multiple terms, including participatory research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), collaborative research (Penuel et al., 2020), community-engaged scholarship (Mikesell et al., 2013), research-practice partnerships (Farrell et al., 2021), public participation in research (Shirk et al., 2012), and research co-production (Brudney & England, 1983). While this is an encouraging trend for improving both the quality and use of research, simply claiming the terminology of partnership is critically distinct from enacting equitable engagement in research processes.

In our roles managing research in two urban districts, we have observed, experienced, and facilitated a range of participatory approaches.¹ These experiences have illuminated profound benefits from co-produced research, as well as complex challenges and unanticipated costs for districts. Here, we take up the charge to “scrutinize the power dynamics by which knowledge is defined, constructed, and shared through the research enterprise” (Ming & Goldenberg, 2021, p. 131). As a counterpoint to other authors’ analyses of the “dark side of co-production” from researchers’ perspectives (Oliver et al., 2019), we offer a deeper examination of practice-side costs. From either perspective, illuminating these costs underscores the need for all partners to ascertain whether the potential benefits of co-production outweigh their costs, both for themselves and for others.

We begin by briefly summarizing some of the goals, benefits, and costs of co-production in the literature. This lays the foundation for questions which we raise throughout the chapter about tensions, tradeoffs, and power dynamics that partnerships must navigate when weighing costs and benefits. We then delve into a descriptive analysis of asymmetries within partnerships, exploring

how expectations and experiences may differ depending on each partner's point of view. We also consider the potential strengths of within-partnership asymmetries and how co-produced research might benefit from careful integration of the differing expectations and experiences that partners bring. Next, we discuss the implications of systemic inequities, including those at organizational levels in both research and practice. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for addressing asymmetries and inequities, alongside this provocation: Despite researchers' noblest intentions, "research may not be the intervention that is needed" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 224) – not even co-produced research.

PURPOSES AND BENEFITS OF CO-PRODUCTION

Numerous scholars have described a range of expected and actual benefits from co-production, along with various frameworks and mechanisms through which these benefits materialize. Although the term "co-production" historically has often referred to participatory development or joint production of services with service users, here we focus on participatory research or joint production of knowledge. Co-produced research inherits the same issues in co-produced services, plus more complexity: In addition to elevating "those who know" above "those who do," preconceptions around knowledge generation often privilege academic over practical knowledge, presuming that non-researchers cannot contribute substantively to the research process.

These issues emerge in multiple applied social science fields, including health, environmental science, sustainable development, and education. Both health and education are expected to directly benefit the individuals receiving services while also contributing to broader public well-being, raising ethical questions about balancing individual vs. community good. For environmental science and sustainable development, individual burden may be more salient than individual benefit, with related ethical questions about maximizing long-term public good while ensuring equitable distribution of harms and costs. These themes about weighing relative benefits and costs at the individual and community levels recur throughout the chapter. While a formal review of the literature goes beyond the scope of our chapter, here we summarize some different purposes and benefits of co-production identified through two research syntheses. We find strong parallels between them, with mutually reinforcing arguments regarding how co-production enhances research quality and use.

In their review of literature on health research, Oliver and colleagues (2019) identify four arguments for co-production: *substantive*, *instrumental*, *normative*, and *political*. *Substantive* arguments highlight improvements in research quality, such as through increased relevance or joint creation of new knowledge. *Instrumental* arguments claim that co-produced research is not only more relevant but more likely to be used, due to increased capacity and trust among research users,

greater innovation in the designs resulting from collaboration, and more realistic plans for data collection or practical implementation. *Normative* arguments promote the virtues of accountability to public interests, of sharing knowledge and power as an ethical act, and of mutual learning rather than paternalistic advice. *Political* arguments emphasize the influence of power differentials, such as through including disempowered populations or individuals to increase ownership, relevance, and legitimacy; partnering with those who have authority to implement findings; or collaborating across research and policy to combat negative stereotypes and build trust.

Through a systematic literature search and citation network analysis across multiple fields, including environment, sustainability, and health, Bandola-Gill and colleagues (2023) identify five meanings of co-production: *science-politics relationship*, *knowledge democracy*, *transdisciplinarity*, *boundary management*, and *evidence-use intervention*. We summarize each before highlighting how they align to Oliver et al.'s taxonomy.

The theme of *science-politics relationship* presents co-production as the “link between the understanding of social reality and the ways it is governed” (p. 12). This reinforces *political* arguments for collaboration by situating science as socially constructed and inseparable from society. Thus, complex policy challenges demand public participation in evaluating both knowledge production and decision-making.

Knowledge democracy emphasizes “the integration of local and indigenous knowledge to improve governance and management” (p. 13), seeking to increase interactions among diverse and complementary forms of knowledge, including community-driven approaches. This elaborates upon *normative* arguments for engagement by highlighting the benefits of more fluid knowledge exchange.

Transdisciplinarity argues that complex problems require multiple scientific disciplines and knowledge produced “in the context of application” (p. 14). In these frameworks, co-production emphasizes inclusion, collaboration, integration, usability, and reflexivity as it seeks to transform traditional knowledge production. This theme aligns with *substantive* arguments about improving research quality.

Boundary management focuses on bridging communities to work across multiple boundaries “both within the Science and Technology systems and between science and policy” (p. 15). This cluster seeks to reduce the gaps between evidence production and use by increasing the applicability and usability of science through “linking, brokering, and translating knowledge” (p. 16). Given its focus on matching supply and demand for science in policy, this theme overlaps with both *substantive* and *instrumental* arguments to improve research production and use.

Finally, *evidence-use intervention* frames co-production as a strategy to increase the use of evidence in policy, emphasizing gaps and barriers as “problems to be overcome when working collaboratively across institutional boundaries” (p. 17).

Key strategies include more deliberate dissemination of knowledge and closer partnerships between policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to generate knowledge for decision-making. This corresponds with *instrumental* arguments to increase research use.

We present these summaries to illustrate the range of theoretical and practical perspectives, motivations, and values guiding co-production and to help frame the benefits and costs associated with co-production. These issues invite questions about what is required to realize the envisioned benefits. For example: What conditions and processes are required to manage power differentials and establish trust? Are knowledge and power truly being shared? Which forms of knowledge are being integrated? To what extent is the learning mutual *vs.* one-way? How much time and joint effort are needed to yield mutual learning? Are the benefits (of positive programming outcomes and capacity building for community or practice partners) worth the costs? Whether co-production can truly achieve these benefits depends on how successfully it manages the costs. The following section reviews some of the costs and harms described in the co-production literature.

CRITIQUES OF CO-PRODUCTION

Despite these lofty aspirations, co-production may reinforce inequitable power dynamics while simultaneously cloaking them under the guise of democratic and inclusive ideals. Here we highlight some salient themes emerging from critiques of co-production and participatory methods. Some pertain to co-produced services and participatory development, while others focus more narrowly on co-produced and participatory research. We see both as offering relevant critiques of collaborative and participatory research, whether for implementers or intended beneficiaries.

These critiques note that participants in co-production may find the process costly, inauthentic, or extractive. They may feel “consultation fatigue” (Beresford, 2002, p. 102), tiring of repeated engagement efforts which fail to yield benefits worth the cost of their time and resources (Oliver et al., 2019). Inauthentic participation may emerge when those soliciting input employ “consumerist” approaches (Beresford, 2002, p. 96) which reduce people to labels or numbers. This may occur through tokenizing participants or cherry-picking responses or through discounting individual stories underneath frequency totals. Extractive research treats knowledge from local settings as a resource for researchers to distribute elsewhere, benefiting the researchers rather than those in the local contexts (Wagner, 1997) and sometimes even barring the community organization from owning the data or speaking about the research (Chicago Beyond, 2019).

Even more harmful consequences emerge if participants experience co-production as pathologizing, oppressive, or duplicitous. Co-production may pathologize the less-powerful by calling on them to expose vulnerabilities (Maybin, 2016; Oliver et al., 2019) or relay narratives of pain (Tuck & Yang, 2014). These methods may further oppress participants by reaffirming “dominant hierarchies of credibility” and dismissing their experiences as less-valid forms of knowledge (Harding, 1995; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Engagement experiences may become manipulatory (Arnstein, 1969) or duplicitous if they use participants’ input in opposition to their goals and values, claiming to have taken input yet simultaneously “mirroring and masking traditional professional power” or “providing continued legitimation for controlling and problematic . . . practice” (Wilson & Beresford, 2000, p. 570). Retaining control over how others’ input is used may “reinforce the interests of the already powerful,” with participatory methods potentially functioning as a form of tyranny (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 8).

An analysis of the politics of co-production in environmental science notes that efforts to depoliticize co-production may serve to reproduce or exacerbate inequalities by overlooking power relations (Turnhout et al., 2020). This may occur when elite actors define the scope for participation or the framing of the problem or when discourse expectations position rational and scientific arguments as universal and undermine the legitimacy of alternate expressions of knowledge. The authors further critique the co-production literature for offering overly simplistic recommendations, such as building trust and open communication, creating inclusive and representative connections between stakeholder groups, and developing language that crosses boundaries. Instead, they emphasize the need to openly address sociocultural biases, to directly confront power asymmetries, to encourage mutual criticism of all knowledge claims, and to harness political conflict and informed dissent as a creative force.

In that spirit, we turn now toward analyzing the asymmetrical expectations and experiences that may occur within a research partnership, before examining the system-level inequities shaping them.

WITHIN-PARTNERSHIP ASYMMETRIES

Before comparing the uneven distribution of benefits and costs of co-production, we need to contextualize them within the different expectations held by and for different partners. For simplicity, we focus on the distinction between the “R side” (researchers) and “P side” (policymakers, practitioners, parents/caregivers/community members, pupils) and occasionally refer to “practitioners” for convenience. However, there are additional complex P-side power dynamics that deserve deeper analysis, including greater differentiation of roles among school and central office staff (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012).

Asymmetrical Expectations

We start by noting that asymmetry is not inherently problematic but is actually a strength of co-production. The motivation for collaborating is to learn from and build on the different perspectives and expertise of diverse partners. This constitutes a potential caveat about “democratizing evidence,” or at least the term, insofar as the “one person, one vote” concept of democracy embodies complete equality, regardless of experience, identity, or status. Just as Turnhout and colleagues (2020) argue for openly recognizing rather than ignoring power differentials, we advocate for acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the different knowledge brought by all partners. The benefits of co-production come from integrating multiple forms of knowledge and evidence, which should be honored and critiqued on their own merits. In some cases, the differences constitute a strength; in other cases, a partnership may strive to mitigate or correct the imbalances. Depending on the purpose for their intended use, some ways of knowing may be more informative, while some evidence may be more trustworthy or more useful.

These different purposes and standards for evidence emerge as different expectations by R-side and P-side partners. In seeking to advance scientific knowledge, researchers are beholden to scientific standards of evidence. For practice partners, the purpose for using evidence may encompass a range of uses across Weiss’s (1979) taxonomy. These may include such motivations as understanding a problem or potential solution (conceptual use), improving practices and outcomes (instrumental use), demonstrating the value of a particular practice (strategic or political use), or defending decisions (symbolic or tactical use). These varied *uses* of evidence induce varied *standards* for evidence. For research evidence, these standards may comprise multiple dimensions of rigor and relevance (Ming & Goldenberg, 2021). Expanding to other forms of evidence gathered from multiple sources using multiple methods would invite an even more complex set of standards for evaluating trustworthiness, credibility, applicability, and other criteria.

Drawing from these different expectations for evidence, representatives of research and practice also bring different expectations for co-production of evidence. For researchers, these might include desires to improve the quality of research by making it more useful, to identify problems of practical interest to study, or to increase the likelihood of impact. For practitioners, these motivations might be to expand their capacity to engage in research, to share knowledge with different communities, to obtain an independent perspective, or to access funding to support their work (Farrell et al., 2018).

In addition to these different expectations *by* R-side and P-side partners, there are also different expectations *for* each side when engaging in co-production of evidence. One traditional formulation of this difference is that

researchers produce the research, while P-side partners use the research (Peurach & Glazer, 2012). Co-production blurs these lines, not just in promoting co-design of research and collaborative interpretation of findings but also when encouraging P-side partners to help collect and analyze data (Metz et al., 2019). Negotiating the terms of collaboration requires reconciling what could be meaningfully different perspectives on the benefits and costs faced by each partner. This may depend on their assessment of the relative distribution of money, time, influence, authority, and other forms of power across the partnership.

Asymmetrical Experiences

The differences between the two sides' experiences when engaging in co-production may be conceptualized along multiple dimensions. Here, we explore differences in contributions, costs, benefits, power dynamics, and cultures. We focus more heavily on P-side experiences, since that is where we have more expertise and where we believe the literature needs deeper examination.

Contributions

Since R-side and P-side partners bring distinct areas of expertise, co-production processes should be equitable, not simply inclusive, to account for those differences. Rather than presuming "equal time" or "equal validity" on all issues, this entails soliciting partners' input in areas where they have particular insight to offer or allowing more time to address questions where they are relative novices. Nor is this about arbitrarily elevating practitioner and public voice but rather about designing participation depending on where it best fits (Bobbio, 2019). P-side partners have legitimate expertise to offer at multiple points in the process, not just about relevance and feasibility but also about rigor, given their knowledge of context and implementation. This practical knowledge gives them a deep understanding of both potential mechanisms and alternate explanations for the findings.

Costs

Time. In our collective eagerness to hear practitioner voices, we should avoid demanding that they expend more time and energy voicing and explaining their perspectives. Districts and schools face a plethora of well-intentioned, would-be partners—not just research partners but community partners, funders, and so on. Yet relationships are expensive to build and manage. Policymakers and practitioners cannot afford relationships with every expert, especially since partners (and their funding streams) come and go. Participating in all the structures and partnerships is a burden, as is developing pathways for overcoming the many forms of cross-institutional friction. Productive partnerships must counterbalance

the realities of P-side partners' being minoritized, under-resourced, or otherwise relatively disadvantaged with affording them additional power while demanding less time.

Opportunity Costs. Practitioners also forego alternative work when designing, operationalizing, or interpreting research; equal time may not yield equally valuable outcomes. Ultimately, practitioners and their supervisors need to consider what other work might get scaled back to make room for the research and whether the tradeoff is worthwhile.

Research Ethics. While we all may endorse having more research conducted in practical settings, a critical unanswered question is who should bear the burden of the costs and risks: Which students, which practitioners, in which contexts? This may depend on the tolerance for uncertainty in research. How fully developed should an innovation be to justify testing it in practice? When evaluating potential benefits and risks of the innovation, what baseline should we use: the average experience or the status quo for the participating population? How much confidence is needed in the research design? Do researchers and practitioners perceive these thresholds similarly? How do we convey these uncertainties adequately to enable informed consent for co-production?

Benefits

Added Value. Most essential is to consider whether the research fulfills the desired purposes, and by more than the alternatives. Anticipating this in advance is challenging due to the inherent uncertainty of research. If we knew what the results would be, we would not need to conduct the research. Maximizing its value may entail adjusting the research design or procedures based on emergent findings. One framing questions whether it was worthwhile to generate new research: By how much does the new knowledge advance practice beyond other existing knowledge in the field that may yet change practice? Another framing questions the added value of co-production: Does it improve the quality or use of research by more than the alternatives? Do inclusive and participatory production processes yield higher-quality research? Partners should articulate potential alternatives to weigh these tradeoffs.

Credit and Status. Whether co-production achieves its goals of advancing mutual learning and addressing power differentials depends on answering questions such as these: Whose ideas are being advanced (whose knowledge is being mobilized)? How is credit assigned for the "new" knowledge that is created or discovered? Another lens may compare how status changes when engaging in co-production relative to alternatives: By how much does supporting research lift the status of practitioners? Compared to how much supporting practice lifts the status of researchers? Compared to how much improving practice lifts the status of practitioners?

Power Dynamics

Representing the Minority. The expectation of serving as a voice for the less-heard takes both time and energy. Being fewer in number with less time to offer means that P-side partners face greater pressure for every comment to be even more meaningful in order to exert influence. Bearing this burden may carry additional risk, such as through stereotype threat: Those asked to speak on behalf of historically undervalued groups may experience anxiety about their contributions, lest they confirm negative stereotypes about the groups they represent.

Tokenism. Manipulatory engagement may undermine relationships or trust of research. Just as partnering with practitioners, pupils, and parents risks tokenizing their input if not used with integrity, partnering with policymakers who then engage in symbolic or tactical use risks tokenizing research.

Extraction and Saviorism. Extraction may apply not just to knowledge but to self-efficacy. When researchers bring beliefs that their solution will “fix” the problem, this risks undermining practitioners’ expertise. Being pathologized by researchers who lack respect for teachers may diminish their confidence or curiosity, persuading them that inquiry is best left to anonymous others who focus on numbers rather than qualitative insights; who can obtain large sample sizes; and who supposedly bring independent, unbiased methods.

Cultures

Research and practice operate under different institutional cultures and expectations not just in timelines but also in responsibilities, accountability, and incentives. While both provide education, school districts serve K-12 students—mostly minors, in compulsory education—whereas universities serve undergraduate and graduate students—adults who have opted in as paying customers, even if scholarships and financial aid cover their costs. Districts are accountable to the public for achieving specific student outcomes yet must guard data privacy; researchers are accountable to their institutions and disciplines for producing research and are encouraged to promote open science. Educational institutions on both sides are incentivized to maximize their student enrollment, while researchers are highly incentivized to maximize research publications meeting particular standards. As the next section elucidates, some of these misalignments could be reconciled, while others are more deeply rooted in longstanding norms or the systems’ functions.

SYSTEM-LEVEL INEQUITIES

Research Organizations

Several promising developments in incentives to change academic institutions include philanthropic grants (e.g., William T. Grant Foundation, Spencer Foundation), shifts

in some universities' tenure and promotion criteria (Ozer et al., 2021), and elective classifications recognizing community engagement and leadership for public purpose (American Council on Education, 2024). Still, structuring research organizations for co-production demands many investments, including support from upper leadership (e.g., university administrators) to remove barriers. It depends on an organizational structure with dedicated, adequately resourced staff such as partnership liaisons, data managers, and communications experts. Other key resources include access to grant support, institutional review boards, contracts offices, and data infrastructure. For example, inadequate research organization capacity may create inefficiencies or risk data breaches, further burdening districts and community partners. Smaller research organizations lacking these resources will find co-production more difficult, limiting the range and impact of research that occurs.

Researchers

Not all researchers have the liberty to engage in co-production, whether due to restrictive academic incentives, inadequate institutional support, positionality and social capital, or insufficient skills and training (Oliver et al., 2019). Partnership should not be performative: Not all researchers are prepared for truly empowering and emancipatory collaboration, which should temper the enthusiasm for participatory approaches. Good intentions notwithstanding, they may nevertheless produce extractive research. Emerging frameworks for scientists' roles in co-production reveal numerous tasks beyond conventional research expectations, such as deliberative processes, discovering ideas in the periphery, formulating "realistic problem-solution couplings" (Hoppe, 2018, p. 401), balancing political tensions, and adapting to non-researcher feedback (Adelle et al., 2020; Knowles et al., 2021). These demand knowledge, skills, and dispositions which must be sought out and cultivated.

Research Methods

Even the most inclusive and equitable participation norms cannot guarantee producing rigorous and relevant research. At minimum, managing complex participatory dynamics and generating high-quality research are different skills. In some cases, they may seem to function in opposition. Equitable engagement takes time, whether to build understanding, develop authentic two-way (or multidirectional) communication, or demonstrate reciprocity. The research may then proceed more slowly, enduring more turnover on both sides or missing data collection opportunities due to desire for caution. Another difficulty is finding the right balance to function as a critical friend. Well-intentioned researchers may err too far in trying to follow partners' interests, avoiding posing important, hard questions that could ultimately yield more valuable information.

The different standards of evidence between research and practice motivate different methodological preferences. Academic incentives emphasize publications, while practical values demand outcomes. Whereas researchers want program implementation that is straightforward to evaluate, districts must prioritize serving students well. The expectation for higher levels of confidence in research privileges methods that provide evidence of causality without elucidating underlying causal mechanisms. Districts need insight into those processes in order to adapt them to improve outcomes. Yet the methods that yield evidence with this practical utility, such as implementation research and continuous quality improvement, are not as well known or valued in academia (Ming & Goldenberg, 2021).

Practice-Side Organizations

While much educational research might benefit by including more co-production and participatory methods, the potential co-producers may not experience reciprocal benefits. Education agencies and community organizations have differential access to research institutions, so promoting co-production approaches may further exacerbate inequities in the populations and contexts that are researched. The same practitioners or participants whose perspectives are so valued may themselves lack the liberty or capacity to indulge in the luxury of research collaboration. Practice-side organizations also need systems and staff whose job descriptions include this work, positioned in offices with sufficient authority and resources to do this work (Farley-Ripple et al., 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To better realize the intended benefits of co-production while mitigating unnecessary costs and risks, we close with two sets of recommendations: one for equitable engagement within partnerships and another for systemic change to address root causes of inequities. This framing aligns with the emerging body of frameworks for equity in research-practice partnerships that highlight relationships and systems as distinct dimensions (Henrick et al., 2019; Sexton et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2021). These represent just a few ideas which we hope the field will continue to further develop and improve.

Equitable Engagement Within Partnerships

Differentiated Inclusion

Numerous scholars have noted the value of cultivating trusting, inclusive relationships and establishing collaborative processes for effective partnership (Chicago Beyond, 2019; Henrick et al., 2019; Yanovitzky, 2020; Sexton et al., 2020; Cooper et al., 2021). Given the importance of diverse skills and knowledge in

partnership roles (Sexton et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2021; Sjölund et al., 2023), we recommend adding more nuance to the principle of inclusion to emphasize differentiated engagement. Rather than presuming an equal division of time, labor, influence, or benefit across partners, equitable engagement should differentiate what, when, and how each partner contributes, based on their strengths, capacities, and needs. This entails considering if there are particular phases in the co-production process when certain roles' involvement is more valuable and less costly for them.

Power and Autonomy

Beyond simply giving community partners multiple opportunities to participate—which they might hesitate to refuse, should future invitations cease—leaders must genuinely afford them the power to choose which participation and decision opportunities they want, reflecting ethics of informed consent without strings attached. Designing participation opportunities also demands interrogating implicit assumptions about the type and value of expertise that each role brings when structuring the engagement. For example, is legitimacy positioned in a manner that aligns with how those individuals would identify their own areas of interest and expertise? Further, this differentiation must incorporate strategies to mitigate and shift unequal power dynamics, which cross multiple dimensions of identity, professional role, educational background, and organizational affiliation (Sexton et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2021; Diamond, 2021; Ishimaru et al., 2022; Tseng, 2024).

Proactive Benefit

Another common theme is to provide a benefit through being responsive to (Yanovitzky, 2020) and supporting the goals of the practice organization (Henrick et al., 2019). Given the slower pace of research, we would encourage shifting from “responsive” toward “anticipatory,” thinking in advance about what might help the community and preparing to act quickly. However, rather than trusting their assumptions, researchers must engage the community in discussions about their needs and potential benefits early in the process, especially to guard against temptations toward saviorism.

Cost Analyses

Most especially, we advocate looking beyond benefits alone to explicitly analyze costs and consider whether the benefits outweigh the costs, from the perspectives of the intended beneficiaries and implementers. We recommend applying cost-utility analyses by role, alongside an open discussion across roles, to unearth hidden costs and to lessen the inequitable distribution of risk and reward (Hollands et al., 2019). As academics grow more aware of the many avenues by which

researchers and research cause harm to communities (Kirkland, 2019; Sexton et al., 2020; Doucet, 2019, 2021; Tanksley & Estrada, 2022; We All Count, n.d.), the imperative to redress this history and prevent future harm grows more urgent.

Systemic Change to Institutions and Norms

Beyond relationships alone, systems models illuminate key structures and processes that enable and constrain the production and use of research (Best & Holmes, 2010), which may be applied to systems *within*, *between*, and *beyond* the partnering institutions. *Within*-institution systems include building capacity within each organization to co-produce research (Henrick et al., 2019) and supporting practice organizations to strengthen their existing infrastructure, structures, routines, and continuous learning cycles for generating and using evidence (Yanovitzky, 2020; Cooper et al., 2021; Farley-Ripple et al., 2022). *Between*-institution systems include partnership structures such as funding, governance, and strategic roles, as well as system alignment, cross-agency networks, and pipelines for boundary-spanning staff (Cooper et al., 2021; Farley-Ripple et al., 2022). Finally, systems *beyond* the partnering institutions include the policy environment (Cooper et al., 2021) and the norms and practices of the broader research enterprise (Sexton et al., 2020). Our elaborations and additions to these recommendations focus on questions about *what* to research, *how* to research, and *alternatives* to direct partnership or even research.

What to Research

Many scholars have advocated for strengths-based approaches to assessment and research that reject deficit frames and humanize participants, especially from marginalized communities (Maton et al., 2004; Rubin et al., 2012; Simmons & Lehmann, 2013; Doucet, 2021; Castillo & Gillborn, 2022). For example, positive deviance methods explicitly seek to discover, understand, and spread bright spots in practices more broadly across local communities (Marsh et al., 2004; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Developing and validating more inclusive measures of success that reflect a broader range of community values offers a path for recognizing assets in accountability systems. Another strategy to counteract deficit narratives is to study and measure experiences (NASEM, 2019; Ming, 2023; Balu et al., 2023). By exposing opportunity gaps and education debt in the current context and past experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2006), such data reveal the unequal inputs contributing to unequal outcomes.

Moving further upstream, researchers could study “up” (Scott, 2020) by examining, interrogating, and exposing the power structures and policy decisions that produce downstream inequities rather than conducting yet another study on the dispossessed. Structures and policies can often be more inscrutable

than impacts, whether due to lack of historical continuity or the opacity of policy language and process. A related alternative might be to conduct evidence syntheses anchored in community interests, where they contribute to the questions without needing to be researched, since the data come from extant literature (Nasser et al., 2013; Grill, 2021).

How to Research

Building on Farley-Ripple et al.'s (2022) recommendations to change the pressures on the system to facilitate more equitable partnership, we urge building capacity on both sides to sustain others' research production and use, even beyond one's own immediate interests. This includes creating partnership structures and evaluation metrics that ensure accountability to the community—not just to funders or to research organizations—that consider costs as well as benefits, and that represent community values about both experiences and outcomes.

Researchers should also consider alternatives to partnership if they are not able to ensure lasting benefits to the community that outweigh the costs and potential harms of direct partnership. Rather than asking the repeatedly marginalized to bear the burden of helping others illuminate the mechanisms of marginalization, researchers can draw from other resources to study structural and policy barriers. This might include analyzing publicly available administrative data to expose inequities, perhaps alongside collecting primary data on policymakers' processes to reveal connections.

Alternatives to Research

Improving the conditions, capacity, and impact of research production and use entails many other avenues beyond conducting new research. One obvious need is to strengthen systems and processes for curating and using existing research. Another potential area is to develop systems for eliciting and elevating practice-based knowledge at scale so that minoritized voices need not perpetually repeat the same wisdom anew in every partnership. More generally, researchers and others with influence can advocate to change inequitable incentive structures and inefficient policies and to provide more funding directly to practice agencies and community organizations so that they can sustain and implement the knowledge already available.

CONCLUSION

Of the many thorns guarding the path to coproduced research, some may be gracefully bypassed, while others may be critical protections demanding pause before proceeding. Recognizing this delicate balance, we remind the reader that co-produced research may not be the most effective, equitable, or ethical

solution: There are other avenues for researchers to study consequential issues for policy and practice and to respond to communities' concerns without burdening them with demands for additional data collection or engagement. And, of course, there are plenty of other pathways for supporting education that do not involve research. Whether and how to pursue research co-production depends on carefully weighing alternatives across multiple perspectives to decide how best to balance the desired benefits against potential costs and harms.

NOTE

- 1 This chapter was initially drafted when the first author managed the research portfolio at San Francisco Unified School District; the second author directs external research at Chicago Public Schools. Our combined experience in these roles totals approximately 17 years.

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The Case Studies

Theme 1: Navigating Partnerships and Relationships



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Centering Equitable Relationships in a Young Research-Practice Partnership

Design Features and Dilemmas

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The “Research for Equity ALliance” (“REAL”)¹ is a collaboration between a large urban school district (“LUSD”) and its neighboring R1 university (“UrbanU”) that brings together researchers and practitioners to understand and transform educational inequities. This chapter tells the story of the partnership’s first major research project, focusing on the research practice partnership (RPP) directors’ efforts to nurture and sustain equitable relationships. We spotlight the roles of facilitation and brokering in both navigating power dynamics between and within the two institutions and in supporting the joint construction of an equity-centered research agenda. Specifically, we draw on evidence from observations, interviews, process surveys, and artifacts of the group’s work to describe how particular design features promoted the development of equitable relationships and genuine agency among participants, which in turn supported the co-construction of research questions and method. We also examine the challenges to equitable relationships posed by the organizational and sociopolitical contexts, the resulting dilemmas in facilitation, and how REAL’s directors worked to negotiate these dilemmas.

METHOD

This chapter relies on data collected by a small evaluation team enlisted to track the group’s progress. Data collection materials were created using the framework for RPP effectiveness developed by Henrick et al. (2017). This framework was further refined and adapted into an assessment tool by the Regional Education Lab Southwest

(Scholz et al., 2021). To enable a close study of the group's work and anticipating the value of sharing findings with a broader audience, the lead authors secured Institutional Review Board approval before evaluation activities commenced. Interview participants ($n = 9$) were recruited for virtual interviews at the end of the first year of implementation. Other data sources included meeting transcripts and video recordings, surveys collected at the end of meetings, and artifacts from the group's work.

PARTNERSHIP HISTORY, STRUCTURE, AND CONTEXT

REAL was launched in 2021 with the goal of helping to understand and eliminate persistent inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes associated with racial identity, ethnicity, economic disadvantage, and disability. The focus on eliminating inequities aligned closely with both partners' commitments to racial equity, reaffirmed in the context of the racial justice movement of that time. Early in 2021, LUSD's superintendent had announced the goal of overcoming long-standing disparities in student outcomes as a core district priority, and a district equity plan published that year framed these disparities as a product of inequitable systems and practices. COVID-19 intensified the urgency around disrupting inequities, and the substantial Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) resources flowing to the district in the pandemic's wake created new opportunities to innovate in pursuing this goal. At the same time, UrbanU's leaders renewed the call for equity-focused research—and doubled down on hiring faculty members from underrepresented groups and those whose research centered on questions of equity. The district's stated focus on systems and practices aligned well with the perspectives of the UrbanU faculty.

While the district and university had a long and rich history of cooperation around research, the partners understood that the absence of formal infrastructure and coordination around a coherent set of long-term goals had limited the potential for impact. In establishing REAL, the partners sought to pursue a strategic, *mutually constructed* research agenda that would address key equity challenges and directly engage practitioners to ensure *co-ownership* of the research agenda and findings—and so ultimately lead to meaningful impact on policy and practice. Hence REAL's commitment to equity was two-fold: REAL would advance district and university goals of disrupting and transforming inequities in education by pursuing research to identify, understand, and address unjust systems and practices while also pursuing equity in its research, operations, and governance processes.

Structure

REAL's organizational structure reflects these commitments, with district and university partners equally represented at every level. The governance council is composed of leaders from each institution and is charged with identifying priorities

for research and removing obstacles to research efforts. In operations, REAL is led by two directors, one from the district and one from the university, charged to build and sustain the RPP infrastructure and to nurture strong cross-institutional ties. The core of REAL's work, research, is carried out by small working groups of practitioners and researchers who bring relevant experience, expertise, and authority in relation to REAL's research priority areas. With the facilitation of REAL's directors, working groups engage in a cyclical process of narrowing in on specific problems of practice and relevant research questions, designing studies, conducting research, making sense of emerging findings, articulating implications and new questions, and planning for research use. Working groups are also expected to engage stakeholders closest to practice (school-based educators, families) at various phases of the work. The commitment to equitable practices is reflected not only in working group composition (representing a balance of district and university participants weighted toward the district) but also—as detailed in the following—in the routines and practices for working across institutions.

In their study of 65 RPPs, Farrell et al. (2023) found substantial variation in the logics of equity underlying partnerships' missions and processes. In describing logics of *equity-in-mission*, the authors distinguished among RPPs that focused primarily on closing gaps (on standardized measures of achievement), those focused on amplifying the success of marginalized groups within the existing system, and those that seek to challenge and transform unjust systems of power. The authors differentiated among logics of *equity-in-process* with regard to the types of roles played by participants, who inhabited those roles, and which dynamics were centered (Farrell et al., 2023, p. 211). REAL's stated mission to transform inequitable systems and structures aligns closely with what Farrell et al. described as the logic of power, justice, and anti-racism. However, as examined in the following, in practice this transformative mission is supported by a more collaborative design—with genuine attention to power dynamics, voice, and inclusivity *within existing organizational structures*.

Context

Political Tensions

REAL is located in a progressive-leaning city within a conservative state. Pressed by local advocacy groups to address disparities in student outcomes tied to race, ethnicity, and gender, the district has had to navigate a series of state legislative challenges to such goals, including prohibitions on critical perspectives in curriculum and instruction, scrutiny of booklists, and legislation to prevent practices protecting the rights of LGBT youth.² Given the district's dual accountabilities to the state and local school board, as these tensions between state and city agencies have grown, the sense of vulnerability associated with REAL's mission and activities has heightened.

District-University Relations

Ties between LUSD and UrbanU run deep. In addition to extensive collaboration on education and health-related research, many school and district staff hold degrees from UrbanU. The district has long partnered with the university's educator preparation programs to host practica and internships for UrbanU students, and many LUSD educators serve as adjuncts for UrbanU courses. There are also more personal connections: many UrbanU faculty children attend LUSD schools, and LUSD educators and staff have spouses working at UrbanU.

However, there also is ambivalence. UrbanU is a private, prestigious, predominantly white institution; the district serves primarily students of color and students from economically disadvantaged families. The university is seen by some as elitist and insufficiently responsive to the needs of the surrounding city. While some district personnel see UrbanU research as a valuable resource that advances district goals, others perceive that research as irrelevant or burdensome. Similarly, university faculty have had mixed experiences with the district in their roles as researchers and as parents.

LUSD participants in REAL working groups have varying experience with research. Some are initially daunted by working with accomplished researchers and wonder whether their expertise and experience will be valued. The directors are attuned to the risk that researchers' knowledge could be perceived as more highly valued, affecting power dynamics in the group. Anticipating that a power imbalance weighted toward researchers could impede equitable participation, the directors have focused on ensuring that the voices and contributions of the P-side members are recognized and honored. As REAL undertook its first major research project, power dynamics were top of mind for the directors.

EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS IN GEA²R

But I always felt like there was good participation, you know, equitable participation. I didn't feel like [UrbanU] was dominating or [LUSD] was dominating. I never got that impression. I felt like everyone was extraordinarily respectful, very inquisitive, wanted to know more about whatever was being discussed, that there wasn't ever a finger pointing or a flaming or accusation or anything like that, which we have had in other partnerships that we've had. So it always felt supportive and forward facing.

—GEA²R member

In the year prior to REAL's official launch, the directors invited a group of district central office administrators and a handful of tenured university researchers to form a pilot working group on equity in advanced academics research

(“GEA²R”),³ broadly defined. In addition to building and executing a joint research agenda, the directors sought to develop and pilot a set of structures and processes for pursuing partnership research to inform the development of the planned RPP. The focus was therefore one of convenience—a faculty member involved in REAL’s launch also had been in informal conversation with a member of the advanced academics team, and they had expressed interest in collaboration.

The initial group was White and predominantly male—a concern to the directors. However, given the demographics of the practitioners and researchers working in this area, the directors were unsure how to ensure greater diversity of perspective. In the second year of work, the group expanded to include more women and individuals with underrepresented identities, but the most active group members continued to be predominantly White.

GEA²R met regularly through the school year (primarily virtually) to *co-construct* a research agenda grounded in a shared understanding of district problems of practice. In the spring, the group launched a sequence of research activities focused on understanding inequities in advanced academics, and, the next year, the group received a major grant to extend their analyses and embark on the co-design of solutions.

When GEA²R formed, the researchers and district participants mostly came together as a “group of strangers.” Working within the broader context of sometimes ambivalent LUSD-UrbanU relationships, one GEA²R researcher shared in an interview, “at the beginning [there may have been] a lot of maybe mistrust of me or. . . . That was at least a little bit the flavor that I got on the [LUSD] side that it was maybe, like . . . what were my motives or what was I trying to accomplish in this relationship?” At the same time, some of the district leaders shared that they initially felt a sense of intimidation given the “caliber” and “mystique” of the university participants.

Over time, however, this uncertainty dissipated. In reflecting back on their journey together to date, GEA²R participants speak warmly about the strength of their relationships and the development of trust within the group. The evaluation team also found strong evidence of the development of equitable relationships among participants. In a self-assessment completed by working group members after they had been working together for around six months, all participants indicated that it was “mostly evident” or “fully evident” that, within the working group, “We recognize and respect one another’s perspectives and diverse forms of expertise,” and, further, “We promote collaborative decision making and guard against power imbalances.” In interviews at the end of the first year, participants lauded the relationship building among their group and felt trust was developing in the partnership.

In these interviews, practitioners shared that they quickly realized the researchers were “regular people” who listened and did not try to impose their ideas on

the group. The district participants also came to see themselves as authorities on the system:

[I was] imparting, “Here’s the information that you need to consider when thinking about this, because this is how all this is, how it impacts everything else.” So I would say that any time any of those programs came up and there were questions, that I was the source of authority on, you know, how we—how we implement those programs in the district.

Further, all participants reported a strong sense of joint ownership of the work. Our analysis of meeting transcripts and artifacts (Google Docs, Jamboards, etc.) over the first year of the group’s work suggest that the structures and tools described in the following supported a high degree of co-ownership and agency. In one analysis, we tracked the path of research questions from early conversations to the first round of data collection and then to the submission of the first research proposal. Specifically, we looked at whose questions were taken up, by whom, and how they evolved over time. The emerging research agenda focused on four broad questions—two of which were first voiced by the district team and two by the researchers. Importantly, while the questions had originated from one “side” or the other, at different times they were taken up and elaborated by both practitioners and researchers, so that questions were not owned by individuals or sides but rather became “our question about . . .”. One LUSD member observed, “in some ways like in many ways, I feel like the district is like leading the research questions,” and another commented, “I’m really confident that [the research plan will address problems of practice], mainly because it was such a collaborative process to arrive at these questions.” Even when one of the researchers re-framed the questions for a proposal for external funding, participants continued to voice ownership for this next iteration of questions and the plans to pursue them. The university researchers, who had worked in several established RPPs in different areas of the country, noted that this experience was distinctive in its highly collaborative approach to constructing research questions—a change for them as well. The researchers indicated their participation in the group gave them a deeper understanding of the contexts and constraints that the practitioners had to work within and around to get anything done, which increased their awareness of the district partners’ expertise.

DESIGNING FOR EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS

“I thought like these attempts at the beginning to really try to build trust and relationships and like, facilitate a little background and story sharing and that kind of stuff I thought was helpful.”

—GEA²R member

In envisioning and planning for GEA’R the directors sought to create an environment in which diverse forms of expertise—the unique contributions of practitioners and researchers—could be heard, understood, and valued throughout the research process. Their approach was grounded in the belief that fostering an inclusive community would lead to richer, more actionable research findings to improve local policies and practices. Hence, as illustrated in the following, they intentionally “employ[ed] strategies to shift power relations in research endeavors . . . to ensure that all participants have a say” (Farrell et al., 2021, p. iv). To elicit the diversity of perspective and expertise, deepen participants’ understandings of the practice context, and support a collective vision of what productive lines of inquiry might look like, directors facilitated working group meetings with careful attention to the design of *tasks*, *tools*, and *participation routines and structures*. These design elements helped establish a “third space” (Gutiérrez, 2008) where ways of working differed from those in either organization.

Anchoring *tasks* aligned with phases of inquiry: developing a shared understanding of the problem space, generating and prioritizing potential lines of research to enable participants to critically explore that problem space, identifying relevant data and methods, and formalizing and pursuing a research plan. Because working group members inevitably bring varying degrees of familiarity and comfort with these activities, the directors designed tasks that demanded both practitioners’ and researchers’ experience and knowledge in order to promote a norm of interdependence. For example, in a shared document template that was used to brainstorm possible research questions, for each proposed question, small groups of participants had to fill in both (1) what specific, researchable question participants wanted to answer and (2) the impact answering this question might have on local policy or practice.

Tools to foster equitable engagement included standard meeting agendas shared ahead of time; co-developed norms (and prompts for accountability to these norms), shared authoring apps to get each person’s ideas on the table and create a shared record of our work (e.g., Jamboard, Padlet, Google Docs, etc.), and anonymous polls to support democratic decision-making. These tools provided a sense of continuity, reliability, and anonymity when necessary. The directors also tapped into language as a tool to establish a space that recognizes the experiences of both district and university participants—incorporating vocabulary familiar to district participants in establishing group routines—while building a shared understanding of important research terminology. For instance, the co-directors deliberately incorporated the language and routines of “welcoming rituals” and “optimistic closures” which were familiar to LUSD participants as part of the district’s engagement with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

In designing *participation routines and structures*, directors prioritized both individual and collective engagement to create space for all members to contribute.

Therefore, most working group sessions included time for individual thinking and writing, partner and small group brainstorming and discussion, and whole group discussion. Sessions also dedicated time for participants to provide updates and answer questions about events in the district, university, or field that might bear on the group's work together. Structures like alternating fishbowls allowed working groups literally to center practice-side expertise and ensure practitioners knew they were heard. Practitioners were invited to converse uninterrupted for ten minutes about a particular challenge. Then, researchers were given five minutes to reflect back what they heard, followed by an opportunity for practitioners to affirm and/or clarify the researchers' understanding. Once the group had confidence in their shared sense of the situation, the researchers were invited to share ideas about relevant research or lines of inquiry and practitioners pose questions and provide feedback about how the researchers' approaches might work given the district context. Finally, in each conversation, the facilitators consistently extended invitations to each participant (especially those who had not yet spoken) to weigh in on emerging ideas, thus ensuring that all perspectives were heard and considered.

Taken together, these design features supported the development of trusting and equitable inter-institutional relationships within the third space of the GEA²R working group. However, as described in the following, the directors quickly learned that understanding and planning for *intra*-institutional dynamics would be equally important to the group's success.

DILEMMAS IN FOSTERING EQUITABLE RELATIONSHIPS

Despite the deepening sense of trust and equitable participation that characterized the relationships *within* the working group, over time, power dynamics *beyond* the working group became increasingly significant in shaping the group's collaboration. We turn now to two dilemmas that the directors had to navigate: pursuing a focus on equitable relationships within the working group while working within existing institutional structures, and balancing an urgency to disrupt inequities with taking time to foster equitable relationships.

Equitable Relationships and Institutional Structures in/out of the Third Space

I think that, like, [the] norm of care and deference to, sort of, organizational hierarchy, and being slow and deliberate to get it right, I think has been—I've appreciated.

—GEA²R member

Like other large school districts, LUSD achieves coordination to enact its mission through a clearly articulated chain-of-command decision-making structure.

Although the district recognizes that those closest to the work possess important forms of expertise, key decisions around policies and practices to advance equity typically occur at the highest levels of the organization. LUSD's emphasis on coordination strengthened in the face of local and state political pressures. As GEA²R evolved from a "pilot group" to a core RPP initiative with research findings to share, senior leadership became increasingly aware of and interested in the working group's efforts. With local advocacy organizations and the school board calling attention to educational inequities, the stakes were raised on GEA²R's research. Meanwhile, the increasingly critical stance by the state toward the district's policies (related to COVID-19, LGBTQ youth, and other issues) amplified the sense of vulnerability felt by district leadership. With the district's increasing sense of vulnerability and greater attention to the working group's charge came heightened attention to the question of who held authority to make decisions on behalf of the group—even though the group included a member of executive leadership.

While the directors had anticipated and designed for inter-institutional power imbalances, their plans did not initially account for these *intra*-institutional power dynamics—that is, how the organizational and cultural dynamics within each partner organization would inform and constrain group members' participation. However, these dynamics became increasingly evident in practitioners' participation in the working group. Even as GEA²R participants developed a strong sense of trust within the group, the directors and the internal evaluation team noticed that LUSD members of the working group who were positioned lower in the organizational hierarchy frequently qualified their contributions and deferred to those in the group who were positioned higher. This dynamic was accompanied by comments like—"I'm just a . . ." or "You'll have to ask . . ."—or just staying silent.⁴ Participants also surfaced these dynamics in their reflections at the end of the first year. One commented, "I think we at [LUSD] have more issues of trust that we have to work through than we do between [UrbanU] and [LUSD]; largely because we are so hierarchical."

The need to work within LUSD's organizational hierarchy conflicted with REAL's commitments to promote the agency and honor the voices of those who were closer to the work. This tension was not lost on working group members. As one of the LUSD participants said: "The constraining forces are again more about our hierarchy and I do worry about that because sometimes the people closest to the work can give you the best information and have the best questions."

As a result, although the working group structure and facilitation effectively leveled the playing field between practitioners and researchers with regard to voice *within the group*, the asymmetry of hierarchical pressures created an imbalance with regard to *agency in their own institutions*. In that sense, researchers and

practitioners did not enter into the work on an even footing. Because they knew that they were not the ultimate decision-makers, LUSD participants felt compelled to clear each decision at a higher level. One of the researchers pointed to this dynamic: “So in particular, like making sure we take the time that if there’s someone in the decision-making hierarchy within the district, especially that needs to weigh in on something, that we make sure that they’ve weighed in on it before we proceed.” In contrast, UrbanU researchers felt no such constraint; it would not have occurred to them to check with their department chair or dean to make sure that research decisions were aligned with the university interests. This sense of autonomy possessed by UrbanU researchers was not available to LUSD practitioners.⁵ Such power imbalances are underexplored in current RPP scholarship and warrant attention.

While early on, district organizational hierarchies did not pose a significant obstacle to participation, as the group progressed from gathering and interpreting data to articulating next steps—such as communicating and acting on data—the combination of external politics and district coordination structures brought the work to a standstill. Therefore, in addition to strategies to ensure equity of participant voice within the group (regardless of participant status), the directors responded by working with the district leadership to develop processes and tools to keep LUSD leaders informed about working group progress and to secure approval at specific stages of the research. These brokering practices (Wentworth et al., 2023) recognized the realities of distinct organizational culture, provided clarity about working group members’ authority and constraints on that authority, and eased the burden of approval from working group members. Hence the directors sought to ensure that the asymmetries in hierarchical pressure would neither undermine equitable relationships within the working group, nor stymie group progress in research.

Urgency to Address Inequity Versus Cultivating Equitable Participation

In interviews with GEA²R members, most expressed a strong desire to move faster, noting that the process to develop a collaborative research agenda felt “slow,” “plodding,” and, at times, “painful.” This sense of urgency was particularly acute on the practice side, where sources of urgency around the work included external (i.e., community and school board) pressure to address long-standing inequities in advanced academics, internal eagerness and passion for addressing such challenges in the district, and the general nature of district and school operations and associated timelines for decision-making. The slow pace of the group’s work was juxtaposed against the fast pace of day-to-day district work.

“The work doesn’t stop just because we’re engaging in this research partnership,” shared one GEA²R member from LUSD, who went on:

And so while the work as I mentioned is moving pretty slowly to develop research questions, we're working pretty quickly on some other stuff to do some systematic changes . . . coming back to the research group sometimes is challenging because we're still stuck in something we've been talking about you know, two weeks ago . . . and since the two weeks have passed, a lot has happened.

Interestingly, for R-side participants, the sense of urgency was also grounded in a commitment to supporting the district in addressing pressing issues—rather than by more expected pressures around publication. One UrbanU group member explained, “All of us were tenured faculty members, and so we also didn’t have to be in a hurry to pursue lines of research in ways that I think were sort of advantageous for the group, because the opportunity cost of our time was lower relative to not yet tenured faculty.” The group’s transition from crafting a research agenda to conducting research did coincide, however, with an expansion of the working group to include non-tenured researchers (including graduate students and postdocs), and this shift may have implications for the sense of urgency on the R-side moving forward.

Given the felt urgency to address the very real inequities for youth who are enrolled in the district’s schools *today*, why did the directors not press the group to move faster? As is well documented in the partnership literature, nurturing and sustaining trusting and equitable relationships takes time. The design features to support the formation of equitable relationships described previously were time intensive. However, the slow progress of the work was not *only* about building relationships. Working group members also needed to build a shared foundation of understanding about the problem space, productive lines of inquiry, and potential implications. As one GEA²R member described in an interview, “it just takes a while for people to kind of wrap their minds around the complexities—and even I don’t understand fully all the complexities and nuances of the problem we’re trying to solve, but also the context.” Creating this joint understanding involved significant information sharing—such as information about what was known and what was *not* known—and so demanded a level of trust and vulnerability among all participants. Equitable and trusting relationships were a necessary precursor to building the capacity of the group to construct a research agenda that could truly be reflective of and responsive to P-side needs.

Nevertheless, a slow pace has real costs—partner time, group momentum, and the sense that the partnership is responsive to district needs. Since the initial draft of this chapter was written, REAL’s leaders decided to implement a (maximum) three-month timeframe from convening a new working group to research plan approval; the duration for other working groups had ranged from six months

to a year. We will be watching closely as the directors adapt routines and norms to support this accelerated timeline.

Summary and Implications

The previous narrative presents learnings about building equitable relationships in a relatively young research practice partnership. It is a story of real wins and unanticipated challenges. In preparing for REAL's launch, the directors had become well-versed in the RPP literature, including the many studies spotlighting the importance of nurturing trusting and equitable relationships between practice and research partners—and the many challenges of doing so (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Booker et al., 2019; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2018; Henrick et al., 2017; López Turley & Steven, 2015). This literature describes ways in which genuine collaboration around the work of defining problems, identifying methods and tools to pursue them, examining and interpreting results, and using results to inform policy and practice can help build the trust critical to partnership success. Numerous studies also make clear that attending to dynamics of position and power is crucial to both seeding and sustaining this trust (Ishimaru et al., 2022; Jurow et al., 2016).

Accordingly, the directors designed practices (tasks, tools, participation structures, and routines) to cultivate trust and manage power imbalances between institutions. Both anecdotal and more systematic evidence suggests these practices were fairly successful in the case of GEA²R. All group members described intra-group relationships as warm and supportive. The final set of four research questions reflected the concerns and interests of every member of the group, regardless of position across and within institutions.

However, *intra-institutional* dynamics also affected working group progress: while the group established a kind of “third space” *within* the working group, the directors would have to develop additional strategies to support and represent the working group's efforts to institutional leaders outside the group. Cross-institutional imbalances in power and agency were not just a matter of the status afforded by one's educational attainment or institutional affiliation *but also defined by the relative freedom and authority participants had within their own institutions*. This distinction is important: understanding the nuances of how differences in who is authorized to make which decisions—and how they are shaped by such factors as sociopolitical context and the tension between professional discretion and the press for coordination—could be particularly important for RPP brokers navigating across organizational boundaries.

The logistics of coordinating with organizational structures beyond the working group, along with the demands noted previously of knowledge-sharing and capacity-building, surfaced a second challenge for equity-centered RPPs: the tension between the demands of fostering equitable participation and the urgency

of remedying long-standing inequities. As the directors half-joked, “How can we get s*#!^ done to actually address inequities, while doing it the right way—actually caring about equity in the process?”

Finally, threaded through both dilemmas was the conflict between REAL’s transformative mission and the felt need for REAL to operate within existing systems when attending to questions of power dynamics, voice, and inclusivity (Farrell et al., 2023). REAL’s directors strive for equity in goals, topics, and methods. However, given a formidable sociopolitical context and the directors’ positions within LUSD and UrbanU, they perceived that fostering equitable relationships to achieve transformative equity goals required working within *existing* systems toward a transformative mission rather than challenging or seeking to operate outside those systems from the start. While that decision may have slowed down the work in the case of GEA²R, it has helped deepen district leaders’ trust in its UrbanU partners and broaden the district’s view of REAL’s role in disrupting and transforming inequities.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter discussed important considerations for establishing an RPP that is centered on equitable principles between research and practitioner-side partners. In particular, it touched on the *equitable RPP relationships* component of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. Are equitable relationships the logical initial step of an emerging RPP? Are there other elements of the framework that need to be considered simultaneously?
2. What are the potential benefits (from an equity standpoint) of having co-directors from a university and PK-12 setting within an RPP? What are the potential challenges in sustaining this type of RPP staffing structure?
3. What is the importance of engaging in boundary crossing between university and PK-12 contexts at the beginning of an RPP? How does this facilitate the RPP’s ability to navigate issues of equity?
4. How should researchers within and outside of RPPs consider the potential impact of each research question on policy and practice when drafting them?
5. What sort of hierarchies might organically exist within an RPP structure between a university and PK-12 school system, and how might the RPP go about intentionally disrupting any power imbalances?
6. What are the equity implications for different timeline needs for research and practice side partners within a RPP?

NOTES

- 1 Throughout this chapter, names of institutions and groups are pseudonyms. Marcy Singer-Gabella serves as chief of operations at the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). This chapter was written prior to her joining LPI.
- 2 Mirroring national trends among conservative states.
- 3 A pseudonym.
- 4 Such hierarchies operate for both REAL partners. However, district-side hierarchies had a greater impact within this working group, where LUSD participants were tasked with serving as representatives of the district, while the researchers were only representing themselves as scholars. Currently, the REAL directors are monitoring dynamics on other working groups that include both tenured and untenured researchers to learn how dynamics of seniority and authority might unfold on the university side.
- 5 These dynamics could well vary among higher education institutions. As a private university, UrbanU is relatively immune from restrictions on academic freedom placed on the state's public universities.

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Cultivating a Mutualistic Partnership for Inquiry*

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CULTIVATING A MUTUALISTIC PARTNERSHIP FOR INQUIRY

This chapter narrates the story of the first year of an ongoing school-university partnership created to understand how a community of middle school mathematics teachers and leaders is realizing the district's inspiring vision for ambitious mathematics teaching through meaningful assessment. The project is centered on inquiry, a principal requirement of a research-practice partnership (RPP), and founded on mathematics education and assessment research.

There is a long history of educational researchers working in school districts. Yet there is some question as to the usefulness of this work to practitioners in the ways it has traditionally been conducted (Denner et al., 2019; Henrick et al., 2016). Researchers and practitioners often exist in culturally different contexts with different value systems even when they pursue a common goal to improve the state of K-12 education. Traditionally, educational researchers prioritize the creation or discovery of knowledge and view their school partners as sites for study or as beneficiaries of research. A quick look at this approach exposes the inequities in research partnerships for practitioners. When research is conducted with minimal partnership with schools, there is little consideration of practitioner needs, the research process often disrupts routines and takes time and energy amidst already strained resources, the products of research are disseminated to other researchers with little given back to the practitioner community, and researchers leave once the funding has ended. Most notably, collaborations

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Authors' note: The perspectives expressed in this chapter are intended to represent the experiences of individual authors who participated in the profiled study. They are not intended to represent the broader perspective of the school systems or institutions in which they work.

are superficial, and the wealth of knowledge that exists among practitioners, students, families, and communities is rarely acknowledged.

Practitioners have tried to address this by imposing a “what’s in it for us?” screening of research requests that come their way. In response, the research community sought to address the needs of practitioners through dedicated funds for partnerships (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.; William T. Grant Foundation, n.d.), financial incentives for school systems, and dissemination of results with practitioners. However, these views of a partnership primarily focus on give-and-take mutual benefit. Valued research approaches continue to favor universities as the center of knowledge creation, a notion that is ingrained in all of us, researchers and practitioners alike.

Equitable Research Practice Partnerships

Emerging literature describes the culture and conditions necessary to imagine and realize an equitable RPP (National Network of Educational Research Partnerships, NNERPP, n.d.). Research endeavors must be relevant and useful to practitioners, honor their goals, and fit their vision and mission. Research must support both practitioner and researcher goals and be focused on real-world problems of practice that contribute to “district improvement efforts while also contributing to research and theory” (Henrick et al., 2016, p. 24). An outcome of such efforts is to align inquiry and resulting findings with decisions that schools need to make for their students, teachers, and communities (Denner et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2021). RPPs create spaces for “learning at the boundaries of research and practice” (Farrell et al., 2022, p. 198). They are collaborative efforts to improve education with long-term sustained relationships between researchers and practitioners (NNERPP, n.d.). A successful RPP requires careful cultivation of meaningful relationships between researchers and practitioners to develop a shared language and understanding. There are challenges inherent in the work. K-12 and university partners often have multiple, competing goals that need to be negotiated and renegotiated (Johnson et al., 2016). Adding to this complexity are issues such as changes in leadership and new and existing policy mandates in the ever-changing landscape of educational priorities.

Setting the Stage: Describing Our Partnership

Our RPP story began with the university’s call for competitive seed grant proposals, an internal grant opportunity for faculty, in late May of 2022. Baker, a mathematics teacher educator with existing collaborative relationships with each of the co-authors, brought university faculty (Varier, Bolyard) and K-12 stakeholders (Crawford, the district’s mathematics supervisor) together to explore a potential partnership. Grant activity is valued for Baker and Varier as academics, who offered to write the seed proposal for the team with input from Bolyard.

They anchored project goals to a pressing question in the discipline about the impact of mathematics specialists on teaching and learning (Bolyard & Baker, 2023; Hjalmarson & Baker, 2020; Baker et al., 2021). The grant was funded, and Baker, Varier, and Bolyard conceptualized the next steps by drawing from the emerging knowledge base on RPPs and the learning experiences of RPPs in mathematics education research (Henrick et al., 2017). Crawford joined the research team as the district partner and shaped the inquiry to make it meaningful and impactful to practice.

Partnership Context

The core team of our ongoing project is made up of the three university researchers and Crawford. The project also includes the support of the district's curriculum and instruction supervisor and the director of assessment and doctoral students on the university side. The district members serve in an advisory capacity and provide inputs on the context and priorities that shape the project. Their involvement lends a systems perspective to the study. The doctoral students regard this project as an opportunity to gain research experience under the mentorship of the university researchers (Baker, Varier). The project is located in a mid-size rural school district of Virginia located approximately 80 miles from Washington, D.C., with approximately 14,000 students in its 12 elementary, 4 middle, and 3 high schools and a career and technical/alternative learning center. The project is specifically centered on the four middle schools' mathematics instructional teams composed of both formal and informal math specialists, school administrators, instructional technology resource teachers, and classroom teachers.

Since 2018, the district has initiated multiple shifts to transform K-12 learning such as an increased emphasis on authentic learning experiences and a decreased emphasis on standardized assessments. This project builds on those efforts using a combination of meaningful assessment practice and reflective coaching practice. The district's mathematics Curriculum Study Team (CST) influences mathematics teaching and learning in the district's four middle schools, while Mason sought to chart the mechanisms of this team's influence on classroom instruction. It is the ultimate aim of this project to scale up these practices to impact each and every student to be successful and life ready.

Like other districts nationally, the district faced a tenuous situation for the 2022–2023 academic school year. Specifically, mathematics curriculum-related policies in the state have favored back-to-basics approaches and emphasized traditional standardized testing. Despite the ever-changing landscape, Crawford, as the district math supervisor, is committed to eliminating inequities and deconstructing systemic barriers entrenched within the district's teaching and learning of mathematics. To this end, the district leadership initiated multiple shifts to transform K-12 learning, such as the elimination of, district-wide summative

assessments and decreased emphasis on state standardized assessments. Even so, the alignment of these efforts with state curriculum standards is maintained, as the efforts at the district level have become more student centered through student autonomy in learning and demonstration of learning.

The researchers were committed to the district's efforts and wanted to ensure synergy between the project and the district efforts. The researchers adopted the idea of *research as service* as the guiding principle during project design, implementation, and dissemination. Research as service frames inquiry in terms of prioritizing the needs of practitioner partners so that all aspects of the project attend to contextual demands. As we reflect on our experiences in the first year of this developing this RPP, we highlight four themes that have helped navigate the issues of cultivating an equitable RPP: deliberation, strategies and routines, communication, and reflexivity. Each theme supports a different element of the equity framework introduced in the opening chapter. A common thread across the themes has been the RPP seeking a temporary equilibrium or balance that *felt* equitable. Again, thinking of research as a service to practice has been a helpful framing.

Deliberation to Support Equity in Project Goals

One of the requirements of an RPP is the focus on systematic inquiry of a problem of practice (e.g., Coburn et al., 2013). The first step in our partnership was to bring researchers and practitioners together to arrive at a shared understanding of what we wanted to investigate. All parties agreed that research would play “a central role in providing evidence to inform, not determine, changes to design” (Baker, weekly RPP meeting/September). Each of us had prior experience forging research partnerships, and we brought those to bear without necessarily linking our efforts to the recent RPP literature at first.

Once the proposal was approved by the university, it needed to be aligned with the district's priorities and needs. The district's approach to teaching and learning was teacher centered, trusting teachers to make the decisions that best meet the needs of their students. Crawford, the district mathematics supervisor, was committed to honoring teachers in the post-pandemic recovery period while simultaneously drawing from the district's strategic plan that prioritized goals grounded in the areas of Student Success, Culture, Strategic Partnerships, and High Quality Staff. Together, we worked to align the project scope with both researchers' and the district's goals. The efforts resulted in a co-created one-page document articulating revised goals and study design which served as a public agreement of our work and brought balance to our collective understanding of the RPP.

Table 4.1 provides a comparison of what was proposed and what was finalized in the abbreviated district document. The language of the project goals shifted considerably to reflect assessment use to inform instruction, a key priority of the

Table 4.1 How project goals were shaped through deliberation and dialogue

<i>Original project goals (June)</i>	<i>Finalized project goals (October)</i>
Goal 1: Study the impact of K-12 math specialists as they enact district mathematics initiatives.	Goal 1: Support mathematics teachers' use of assessment data to inform instruction, support learning, and evaluate outcomes of learning and instruction.
Goal 2: Develop a model to evaluate math specialists' influence on K-12 mathematics instructional and learning outcomes.	Goal 2: Develop an initial model to study mathematics specialists' influence on K-12 mathematics instructional and learning outcomes.
Goal 3: Recruit a prestigious, nationally recognized external advisory board to increase university-researcher knowledge and support future external funding opportunities.	a. Understand how the middle school mathematics community is navigating and realizing the district strategic plan. b. Explore how to study the work of secondary mathematics specialists as they enact local mathematics initiatives.

district. One of the main goals was to incorporate the district partner's desire to focus on assessment and data use practice. We discussed the term assessment extensively to arrive at a shared understanding. The research and practice teams maintained a progressive outlook toward assessment, one that was formative, integrated with instruction, and student centered. What was difficult at the time, Crawford noted, was to engage in student centered assessment strategies. Our conversations around assessment led us to adopt the term "meaningful assessment" to represent the district's priority about using assessment and data associated with ambitious mathematics instruction. The term became central to our inquiry. We drew from the National Council of Mathematics' *Catalyzing Change* series (described later) about the use of "assessments that are aligned with and emphasize deep understanding of mathematical practices, processes, and content" and that are connected with students' regular coursework" (NCTM, 2020b, p. 96). Such assessments serve the purposes of both measuring and supporting students' deep learning mathematics while strengthening their identity and agency as doers of mathematics. We landed on an exploratory design to study the work of mathematics specialists as they enacted initiatives related to using assessments to inform instruction.

The next task was to see how meaningful assessment could support the study objective to understand the work and influence of mathematics specialists. We framed meaningful assessment as the *blue ink* to help us trace the influence of mathematics specialists on instruction and learning. Blue ink is a term we have used in the project that draws from dye trace studies used in environmental science to detect water flow and how water systems are connected. It was helpful for us to think of a blue ink (meaningful assessment practice) that would help us

trace information flow from mathematics specialists to teachers (and eventually students), assuming that information flows bi-directionally. We spent the year understanding the flow of information around assessment practices among the mathematics specialists and teachers. This was accomplished through a social network analysis using what we termed a “collaborative conversations survey” with our partners. We measured teachers’ assessment practices and found a variety of strategies in use. Towards the end of the year, we continued our dialogue around meaningful assessment as the RPP strategized for the next year. Crawford recognized that teachers’ analyses and use of student data from rich tasks was not quite where the district’s mathematics leadership team hoped it would be. Seeing that as an actionable and concrete item for next year’s work, we determined that the best approach to honor teachers’ expertise and time and to maintain our stance of using research to inform rather than dictate was to share the story of what we noticed in the data gathered in the first year, present some ideas and/or recommendations, and then allow schools to create their own action plans. Crawford also made plans for deliberate shifts in instructional guidelines to shift to student-centered assessment in the upcoming year.

From these first-year experiences we softened the ambition to develop a model of inquiry to evaluate mathematics specialists’ impact by instead emphasizing an “initial” model to reflect the constraints, feasibility, and exploratory nature of the study. Key to the conversation that informed this change was recognition that the district was still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions of the previous years. The middle school mathematics team experienced considerable turnover in the new school year (2022–23) and on-boarded several new teachers, some new to the profession, others new to the school district or mathematics teaching.

Another notable change during the first year of implementation was a modification of the project goals to be explicitly linked to the strategic plan. As the team worked, we engaged in a deliberative and dialogic process characterized by researchers drafting an idea for review by our partners who offered feedback and suggestions to mold the ideas into a plan that was authentic to the district’s work. The timeline reflects our commitment to creating a shared vision of the work—our proposal was funded in June and the finalized project goals in October. We shifted our thinking about the delay and told ourselves that *good things take time*. This led us to adopt a slower timeline, one that includes time and space for continued deliberation and sharing our process and findings periodically with district partners. These meetings served to shape the project in ways that are mutualistic.

Deliberation to Support Equity in Method

We deliberated on the use of mixed methods as an innovative approach to inquiry that addressed the tensions of unforeseen circumstances and unaccounted-for realities, most notably in disrupting hegemonic notions of research and methodology

(Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Mixed methods work is situated in the pragmatist realm, characterized by methodological eclecticism (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2015) and flexible use of methods. There is growing acceptance for the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches in education research broadly that was also reflected in our discussions. We struck a balance of meeting our axiological commitments toward honoring the lived experiences and priorities of our partners by relying on qualitative and quantitative techniques that were less burdensome, tied to their daily experiences, and provided reflective opportunities. We included individual interviews of mathematics leaders and periodic surveys of the entire mathematics team's experiences over the course of the school year. These techniques yielded information on assessment use, advice seeking patterns on assessment, curriculum and instruction, leadership, and teacher views about meaningful assessment.

Strategies and Routines to Support Equitable RPP Relationships

In the spirit of *good things take time*, a major lesson we learned early on is that an RPP project should be planned at a slower pace to adopt norms, routines, and structures that enable an equitable partnership. The realization led to changes in the project timeline that were not originally anticipated. For example, the first survey of the K-12 community was slated for September but was only ready for implementation in November/early December. It would have been easy to push forward with questions that suited the needs of the project. However, slowing down and engaging with the district with the intent of equity helped fully understand the district's priorities around the central research questions.

All of our efforts to date have been dynamic and evolving as our RPP responded to the district needs in a manner that was mutualistic. We adopted intentional strategies and routines to foster equitable relationships that balanced time commitments because we quickly realized that while we seek equitable input, we needed to develop a framework for what that means for each of the project partners. We developed our thinking about equitable time commitment and input early on. In August 2022, when we began our weekly partnership meetings, we recognized how important regular communication would be for all parties but especially to ensure understanding of the district context to maintain relevance and be responsive to district needs. Specifically, the university team wanted to touch base with the K-12 mathematics supervisor (Crawford) on a weekly basis and proposed a weekly reflection log. However, conversations with Crawford revealed that asking her to maintain a journal of activities and reflections was too much. Instead, she proposed that she debrief her activities verbally on a regular basis.

In response, we set up meetings where the estimated time commitments of the university researchers were 2.5 hours and Crawford's was 30 minutes. As much

as we would have liked her presence and input in all the meetings, we realized that this was outside of her expected duties. In contrast, the university researchers' work expectations include research which translates to dedicated time for this work. We structured these weekly meetings to learn, clarify, and extend our thinking about the work. We used some of our time to gather data in the form of semi-structured interviews, as Crawford was a key source of information given her content expertise and contextual insight. The university researchers carefully planned for these precious 30 minutes each week in an attempt to bring efficiency to the process while honoring the time commitments of our partner.

Communication to Support Equitable Partnerships

Closely related to strategies and routines is communication, a known factor in the sustaining and success of RPPs (NNERPP, n.d.). In addition to adjusting the meeting schedules to honor equitable time demands described earlier, we leveraged communication strategies that would support an equitable partnership and build relational trust. We believe the onus is on the researchers to identify opportunities and expend time and resources toward productive communication. As noted earlier in the chapter, we did this by positioning research as *service*, a useful mindset shift for cultivating an equitable partnership.

The university researchers expanded our interactions by attending monthly meetings of the secondary mathematics leadership team (including principals, mathematics specialists and leaders, and the district supervisor). This was a way for us to get to know their work and for them to recognize university researchers as familiar faces. The meetings were scheduled for 45 minutes, and the RPP was allocated about 10–15 minutes each time. We used our time to share data around meaningful assessment and common themes about professional goals. We wanted to present the data in a way that was free of judgment and did not guide or lead the district to predetermined actions/recommendations. We realized that sharing interpretations of the data and recommendations might be unwarranted and potentially imply judgment. We ultimately determined a structure where the university researchers presented key observations and facilitated a protocol to gather the mathematics leadership team's interpretations. The data were typically visual, in the form of tables and figures, and were shared with Crawford to ensure that we were presenting useful information in an effective and efficient manner. This worked well and allowed us the district opportunities to consider the data in ways that were authentic and meaningful to their context.

We focused on communicating our intentions and demonstrating responsiveness to the practitioner needs to earn their time and attention. The strategy seemed to work. For example, at the March leadership meeting, we noticed increased interest and participation in the data. One of the middle school CST members shared that the visualizations of data we were presenting were hard to read and, as a result, to understand. This was a really important breakthrough

because prior to this meeting there was no active input from the CST members. This was one of the first instances of CST members giving us verbal feedback on something that was not working for them. All members of the RPP noticed this during our weekly debrief:

Baker: I really saw a shift in the last CST meeting where the members had more of a voice. Even though the opportunity was always there, we had finally built enough trust in our relationship.

Bolyard: In addition to being present all year long, I think it also stems from doing the interviews. They got to know us. [March 2023 weekly meeting]

In later conversations, the RPP decided to reconsider the 10-minute allocation to one whole meeting every few weeks for better engagement given the increased buy-in from the CST. Further, leadership team members requested that we share/suggest research-informed recommendations based on our observations. Therefore, we plan to incorporate more of this into future presentations while maintaining the position of research as a service to inform, not dictate, district and school decisions.

Sharing progress and findings from the research project to support decision-making is another priority of RPPs (NNERPP, n.d.). We had an open invitation to the district leadership (directors of assessment and curriculum and instruction) to join our weekly meetings. Understanding that their busy schedule would not permit regular attendance, university researchers recorded short 5–10 minute videos of progress and preliminary results and made them available to the leadership. The university researchers always consulted with Crawford for input and feedback to ensure that we prioritized information that our district partners cared about and could use. We shared end-of-year findings to the district before the new school year. Again, as we communicated findings, we were also listening keenly and proactively asking how we could be of assistance to improve mathematics teaching in the middle schools.

In our data collection efforts, we had to strike a balance between increasing teachers' motivation to participate in research activities without being coercive. We used personalized email communication with participants whenever possible and scheduled survey invitations and reminders to minimize disruptions to their daily routine. Crawford bolstered data collection efforts by verbally reminding teachers that they received communication from the research team. We recognized that Crawford, as an administrative leader, potentially had undue influence over participants if there were teachers who did not wish to participate. We traversed this issue by developing norms around data sharing. The university researchers managed the data and identifying information about participants that were withheld from the district. When we shared results, data were de-identified or collapsed across categories to effectively de-identify individuals (for example,

math specialist data were aggregated and not reported by school because each school had one or two serving in that or an equivalent role).

Shifting to a mindset of research as service in an RPP, of course, meant increased demands on the researchers' time. Among the three university researchers, we took on primary roles that helped with project management. For example, Baker led the communication with the district partners, and Bolyard supported these efforts as needed, including representing the RPP at the leadership meetings. Varier led the communication with participants for data collection which included periodic surveys and reflection logs with support from Baker and Bolyard as needed. We shared responsibility for most research tasks and found a balance drawing on each other's strengths and expertise.

Strategies to Develop Shared Understanding of Equity

Developing a shared understanding of equity was the most difficult aspect of this ongoing RPP. The current sociopolitical climate around equity is particularly relevant in our case, and it served as a catalyst for our individual and collective thinking about equity work. Our project framed equity in terms of the literature on mathematics teaching intertwined with the current political climate that threatened the use of equity as a lens for the work. We describe how this framing was manifested in how we focused on equity.

We believe teaching is a political act “shaped by power, access, and structures/ systems of (in)equity” (Cochran-Smith, 2020, pp. 50–51). While mathematics is often viewed as an objective discipline, it is, in reality, a human endeavor and a form of capital for those who attain high levels of achievement in the subject (Bullock, 2017). Not all have equal access to this capital. Multiple mathematics education organizations have recognized the pervasive structures that sustain inequities in our educational system (e.g., AMTE, 2020; TODOS: Mathematics for ALL's (TODOS), 2020, and the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics' (NCSM), 2020) and have called for action to address these disparities. One structure that perpetuates these inequities is the narrow focus on standards and accountability via high-stakes assessments which creates a climate of pressure surrounding performance to the detriment of effective instructional practices (Hursh, 2007). Performance on high-stakes tests is used “as a gatekeeping tool to sort and rank students by race, class, and gender” (NCSM & TODOS, 2016, p. 2), perpetuating inequities and amplifying “gap gazing” (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Ambitious Instruction and Catalyzing Change

We framed equity in terms of ambitious mathematics instruction. (Lampert et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2013). Ambitious mathematics instruction focuses on supporting students' deep learning of mathematics. It emphasizes connections among ideas, eliciting and responding to students' thinking, and facilitating

discourse that focuses on justification of ideas (Thompson et al., 2013; Youngs et al., 2022). Ambitious mathematics instruction is holistic examination of varied sources of data to understand student performance, which aligned particularly well with the project goals. Recently, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics released the *Catalyzing Change* series for elementary (2020a), middle (2020b), and high school (2018), designed to provoke discussions about effective ways to ensure that “each and every student has access to high-quality mathematics teaching and learning” (NCTM, 2020b, p. xii). We relied on these works to develop a shared understanding of equity. Our efforts to understand the work of mathematics specialists and teachers is based on the premise that “every student is capable of engaging in rigorous and challenging mathematics” if they have access to quality instruction and appropriate resources (NCTM, 2020b, p. 1). We adopted principles of *Catalyzing Change* because it explicitly attends to issues of power and social justice and challenges teachers, schools, and districts to “dismantle inequitable structures” in mathematics teaching and learning (p. 6).

While mathematics education research continues to study teaching and learning and offer frameworks such as ambitious instruction, there is not always a concerted effort to support schools in understanding and implementing these ideas. Further, there is less opportunity to examine how these ideas are realized in schools with varying contexts beyond those in which they were originally developed. As research reveals additional understandings about equity and the inherent barriers and supports, the issues continue, creating additional disconnect. Without understanding the various contexts—cultural, geographical, economic, social—in which teaching and learning occur, it will continue to be a challenge to systematically improve mathematics teaching and learning.

Current Climate Toward Equity

Our RPP school partners shared a commitment to ambitious instruction and the recommendations outlined in *Catalyzing Change*. The district’s strategic plan reflected the district’s mission and vision, and we saw clear alignments with notions of inclusive excellence. Crawford has worked to eliminate mathematics pacing guides and reduce emphasis on state standardized assessments in her district. In addition, she has emphasized practices such as data-informed decision making using meaningful formative assessment data and providing teachers coaching support as means for guiding instruction that can support all students to achieve. A result of our shared understanding (as described in Table 4.1) was to emphasize desirable assessment practices and their role in furthering ambitious instruction. In pursuit of this effort, we made a more explicit connection in our middle of the year survey by asking the mathematics teaching team their perspectives and opportunities to engage in equitable assessment practices.

As with many educational systems across the country, Virginia’s educational system has experienced recent policy mandates as a result of the sociopolitical

climate in the country, as described in Chapter 1. Virginia's policies have brought school curricula and practices under scrutiny for "divisive" material to push the discourse toward color-blind meritocratic ideals. These policies included an executive order that rescinded or called for actions to review equity-oriented guidelines, materials, and practices in the state and the reversal of a state-wide equity-focused mathematics initiative (see Chapter 1 vignette). The policies are also trending toward a "back-to-basics" approach to mathematics instruction. Our project started just as these policies were put in place. The researchers continually examined how to support our partners whose ability to engage in equity work is curtailed by these policies. Again, the privilege of academic freedom to continue work that is out of favor politically conflicted with our partners' requirements to comply with the state and simply doing the important work of educating children amidst socio political upheavals after a global pandemic. Achieving a balance for equity work that is meaningful, comfortable, and safe for all is an ongoing negotiation of our work.

Reflexivity to Cultivate Our Individual Mindsets for RPP Work

Reflexivity is a core aspect of gaining professional expertise. We described reflexivity because it is an intellectual exercise and a necessary building block of an RPP. However, as we jotted down our individual reflections, a theme of emotions became apparent which made visible the countless instances where we indulged each other's spectrum of feelings from apprehension to excitement. We attended to each other's need for self-care with empathy as we traversed the emotional nature of working in service of teachers and students. We realize that in our professional work, we rarely take into account the humanness in each of us when we are immersed in intellectual work.

From the launch of our RPP it was essential that each stakeholder examine our own beliefs, judgments, and practices, as these might influence the partnership in (un)anticipated ways. We each considered the influence of our multifaceted backgrounds, past and present (e.g., K-12 teacher/leader, faculty/adjunct). We reflected on the potential authority of these roles traditionally perceived by others as well as the dynamic tensions we each experienced as we both negotiated our norms and crafted project goals and an agenda that met each of our unique needs but ultimately centered on the middle school mathematics teachers and leaders. Reflexivity was central to the functioning of the RPP—for maintaining a commitment to equity in the sociopolitical climate, developing interpersonal relationships, rethinking our approach to research methods, keeping teacher wellbeing and success at the forefront of this work, and meeting researcher goals of academic recognition for this work. In other words, reflexivity fueled the RPP process across the five elements of the framework.

We each had unique responses to the developing RPP. Combined with openness and active listening, we have learned to navigate the messy and uncertain nature of research in schools. There were also areas of complementarity that helped create a synergistic partnership. For example, Baker's long-standing collaboration with Crawford and Bolyard facilitated communication, while Varier's research methods background and prior experience in RPP research helped frame the study's design and implementation. Bolyard and Baker's experience as mathematics teachers and leaders helped the team be responsive and empathetic to practitioner needs. Crawford's leadership helped ensure alignment with the vision and mission of the school district. Each individual brought a complementary set of skills but also values and priorities that we leveraged at different time points. For example, Crawford's keen awareness of the post-pandemic teaching and learning conditions was crucial to the study design and implementation strategies.

Looking to the Future

As we concluded the first year of the RPP, we collectively agreed that the “crux of everything, all of our questions or wonderings, needed to be centered on [*the strategic plan*]” (Crawford, May weekly meeting). In the latest iteration of the survey of the mathematics team, we posed the question: *How did [the strategic plan] inform your work? How would you like it to inform your work? What resources and/or professional learning do you need?* The work of the RPP is directly relevant to our K-12 partners and their work. For the university researchers, it is a new way of knowing, and we continue to learn. We find ourselves inching closer to understanding the assessment practices and priorities of our partners as we deal with the shifting policy landscape in Virginia's mathematics teaching and learning. In some ways, we are several steps behind what we planned for the one-year research grant—to study the impact of mathematics specialists. Yet, without engaging in this foundational work, we would not be able to realize our study goals—certainly not in a way that would remain true to equitable RPP work.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter focused on the early stages of a developing RPP and the unique considerations necessary related to equity to help it get off the ground and ultimately thrive. In particular, it touched on the *equitable RPP relationships*, *equity in goals*, *equity in methods*, and *shared language of equity* components of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. The authors mention the challenges of developing a shared understanding of equity, particularly given the sociopolitical context in Virginia. In what

ways do changes in broader sociopolitical contexts (e.g., at the state or federal level) impact the work of RPPs that operate at the local or school district level?

2. What are the overlaps between research and service within an RPP? How does this align with or depart from how service is typically viewed in academic settings, and what are the implications for the amount of time and effort that goes into a research study?
3. How did the RPP team structure their meetings and communication to foster equitable relationships, despite differences in time commitments between university researchers and district partners? What additional strategies could help ensure all voices are heard and valued?
4. The authors emphasize methodological eclecticism and the use of qualitative and quantitative techniques that minimize burden on practitioners. How does this approach support equity in the research process, and what additional considerations might be needed to ensure methods are responsive to contextual constraints and elevate marginalized voices?
5. What strategies could be used within an RPP to ensure that research is utilized to inform, rather than determine, policy and practice decisions?

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Sustaining a Research-Practice Partnership While Addressing Disproportionality in School Discipline*

David Naff, Brian Maltby, William Noel, and Tameshia Grimes

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) in education are intended to leverage longstanding, trusted connections between researchers, practitioners, and leaders to explore and address some of the most persistent issues facing public school systems (Farrell et al., 2021). While such partnerships present unique opportunities for generating evidence-based solutions, they also have to navigate common challenges in order to do so. This includes difficulties in coming to a collective understanding of a problem, recommendations not sufficiently attending to real-world applications of research findings in school settings, and navigating through differences in frameworks and everyday work obligations between research and practice partners (Goldstein et al., 2019). Effectively working through these challenges requires building and nurturing trust, actively seeking input from multiple stakeholders directly impacted by the work, and remaining committed to generating findings that have the potential to effectively inform policy and practice (Henrick et al., 2017).

Importantly, RPPs must constantly attend to the egalitarian nature of their partnership to ensure that power is distributed as equitably as possible among partners (Farrell et al., 2023). The challenge with this in an RPP between a university and PK-12 school system is that the risk associated with critical findings is often higher on the practice side, as research studies typically focus on issues related to PK-12 structures and outcomes. This is perhaps particularly true when

**Authors' note: The perspectives expressed in this chapter are intended to represent the experiences of individual authors who participated in the profiled study. They are not intended to represent the broader perspective of the school systems or institutions in which they work.*

RPPs explore topics related to enduring equity issues in public schools, and the latest “State of the Field” for RPPs in education (Farrell et al., 2021) repeatedly emphasized that these partnerships should focus on helping PK-12 school systems work towards equitable outcomes. However, while this is a noble cause, the application of this charge could result in tensions within RPPs between universities and PK-12 institutions who may have different definitions of equity, different accountability systems (e.g., school boards or constituencies) to react to the research, and different opportunities to directly apply the findings with potentially impacted student groups.

In 2016, a mid-Atlantic RPP (pseudonym MARPP) between an urban research institution and multiple school districts in a metropolitan area commissioned a study exploring racial disproportionality in exclusionary school discipline. This longstanding partnership included urban, rural, and suburban school settings, offering a unique opportunity to explore this issue across different contexts. Leading up to this study, MARPP had executed dozens of research projects over its decades-long partnership, but this was the first that would involve the collection and analysis of primary and secondary data acutely focused on the issue of racial and socioeconomic disparities in exclusionary school discipline. Leadership in MARPP districts understood national and state data related to these disparities and sought to better understand how they manifested locally as well as how ostensive policies intended to ameliorate the issue were working in practice. Therefore, this study needed to offer an honest account of the degree to which disproportionality in school discipline existed in the MARPP region, but it needed to move beyond simply pointing out that a problem existed. Participating school districts commissioned the study because they recognized that it was a concern and had begun to implement alternative approaches to discipline in their schools to help address it. What they needed was evidence of how stakeholders perceived those efforts working in practice, as well as practical recommendations for how they could continue to make progress in this area.

THE NATURE OF RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY AT THE ONSET OF THE RPP STUDY

Decades of research on this issue have not only documented the consistently higher likelihood of Black, Latina/o/x, and low-income students of being suspended or expelled out of school (Gage et al., 2019) but have also recommended approaches for potentially addressing them. This includes the reduction of zero-tolerance school discipline policies (Curran, 2019) as well as the use of alternative discipline programs like restorative practices (Velez et al., 2020), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Weist et al., 2022), and trauma-informed care (Thomas et al., 2019), all of which were being implemented in

MARPP school districts when this study was initiated in 2016. School systems across the country have wrestled with this issue for years, seeking evidence-based strategies for promoting equitable school discipline policies and practices. The challenges with addressing disproportionality in discipline are significant because of the complex forces that have perpetuated it over time.

Before the study launched, MARPP school districts were collecting and analyzing data regarding disproportionality related to a variety of pertinent outcomes, including representation in gifted and talented programs, disability identification, and the demographic alignment between the educator workforce (e.g., teachers and administrators) and the students they served. Disciplinary outcomes were also a key indicator at the time, with an intentional focus on disproportionality, as they grappled with identifying the root causes of the disparity in meting out consequences and implementing practices to alleviate the inequitable outcomes. A number of school districts formed equity committees and/or hired staff members to focus on equity work (e.g., diversity, equity, and inclusion or DEI directors) while partnering with non-profit organizations to provide inclusivity and/or equity training to their employees.

Consistent with these efforts, MARPP school districts initially commissioned a study broadly focused on “equity.” Through conversations with university faculty who would help to oversee the project, there was a recommendation to specifically focus on exclusionary discipline, which was ultimately approved by the governance council of the partnership. Part of the supporting rationale was that there was considerable concern at the time about the inconsistent application of “D-codes” (disrespect, disorderly conduct, and defiance; Kirwan, 2016) that were part of the required reporting by the state department of education. These codes were some of the most commonly used by administrators while also being arguably the most subjective when consequences were applied to student discipline.

These conversations about discipline were prominent at the state level as well, which focused on intentionally removing criminal language and “D-codes” from district codes of student conduct documents while exploring alternatives to suspension. The leveled response to discipline as well as the new language was meant to help address subjectivity in application of several of the old discipline codes. At the time that this study was commissioned, Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data showed that approximately 5% of White students in the state received an in-school suspension (ISS) and 5% received at least one day of out-of-school suspension (OSS), compared to approximately 11% and 18% of Black students, respectively. That same year, approximately 10% of students with a disability received at least one day of OSS compared to approximately 5% of their non-disabled peers. Black students with a disability were suspended out of school at roughly double the rate (approximately 15%) of their White peers with a disability (approximately 8%).

EQUITY IN METHODS

To explore this topic, MARPP formed a study team composed of faculty and doctoral students from the university and representatives from each of the partnering school districts with practical expertise administering school discipline, promoting equity district-wide, or both. This included directors of equity and student support services, disciplinary hearing review officers, and administrators. Faculty serving as principal investigators on the study had a history of scholarship in the field. These teams met monthly to determine the scope and focus of the research, ultimately collaborating on a design that was approved by leaders in MARPP school districts who commissioned the project.

The MARPP discipline study had two purposes. First, it needed to provide an account of how racial disproportionality in exclusionary school discipline existed within the region in order to offer targeted recommendations for policies and practices that could help address it. Second, it needed to offer evidence of how prominent alternative discipline programs worked in practice, including how they were perceived by the faculty and staff implementing them (e.g., their fidelity) and how students experienced them. Thus, it was necessary to share quantitative evidence of the landscape of suspensions and expulsions in the region alongside rich qualitative evidence exploring how local schools were approaching their discipline programs. To accomplish this, the team designed a study with two components and received approval from MARPP district leadership about the approach prior to data collection.

Component one consisted of secondary data acquired through a restricted use data agreement from the state department of education depicting longitudinal student-level discipline outcomes along with student race, ethnicity, and disability status. Researchers also acquired enrollment data for the schools in the region to assess the degree to which the racial and socioeconomic composition of schools predicted the discipline outcome of students who attended them. Component two consisted of a multiple case study in which researchers purposefully selected one predominantly Black and high-poverty middle school in an urban environment, one socioeconomically and racially diverse high school in a suburban environment, and one predominantly White and socioeconomically diverse high school in a rural environment. Each school came from a different member school district. All selected schools indicated that they were implementing either PBIS, restorative practices, or trauma-informed care in an informational survey of administrators in the MARPP region. Researchers shadowed educators in each school for part of the day and then conducted interviews to ask them about their approach to school discipline and perceptions of the potential presence of disparities in suspensions and expulsions. Data collection also included focus groups with students to better understand their perceptions of and experiences with the discipline policies in their schools.

Throughout the processes of data collection and analysis, MARPP conveyed regular study team meetings with school district partners. During these meetings, team members engaged in common readings as a foundation for engaging in the research and offered input, including potential interpretation of the findings. For example, one study team meeting consisted of school district personnel listening to de-identified audio clips from educator interviews and student focus groups to offer their reactions to the sentiments shared about school discipline policies by stakeholders in each school. As the study team reviewed data they gained a better understanding of the perspectives of teachers as they referred students for perceived Code of Conduct violations, administrators as they applied discipline, and students who assessed the fairness of their school's discipline program. Team members appreciated being able to hear from each set of stakeholders. Students in focus groups shared how they felt they were treated, sometimes unfairly, by adults, as teachers shared the challenges some of them had maintaining classroom discipline.

Team members would then collaboratively interpret the meaning behind what was expressed in the interviews. Even when understanding that the person they were listening to was not present to explain their responses, individual team members at both the school district and university levels voiced concerns if they believed an answer to be biased or not in the best interest of students. Given the nature of the study, some interview answers led study team members to believe there was a clear opportunity for additional dialogue with schools to explore bias and exclusionary discipline practices. Reactions to interview responses also highlighted the need to include perspectives of stakeholders underrepresented in the data. Conversations focused on the relevance of the findings and how to address apparent misunderstandings about disproportionality. Members shared their thoughts on how stakeholders might react to their school or district data and to the study's eventual recommendations. Opportunities for understanding and collaboration were apparent as the team shared their thoughts about the interviews.

In addition to soliciting input from the study team on research design and data analysis, MARPP researchers shared draft findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components of the project for feedback from district leadership. The purpose of the feedback was twofold. First, it was intended to allow partners to ensure that their school districts were being represented accurately in the data and that the findings resonated with the student discipline outcomes in their division that led them to commission the study. Second, it offered the opportunity for partners to confirm that the implications and recommendations that emerged were practical and actionable at the school and district level, ensuring that they did not solely represent the perspectives of researchers offering potentially unreasonable suggestions for addressing racial disproportionality in school discipline in the region. MARPP researchers offered a similar opportunity for feedback from the steering committee composed of one central office

representative from each member district who also served on the governance council that commissioned the study. Finally, MARPP researchers presented previews of results at quarterly meetings with school district leadership governing the direction of the partnership to ensure that they were aware of the findings and potential implications for their work, along with an invitation to provide written feedback on the final report. District leaders often posed clarifying questions about the emergent findings and reiterated the importance and relevance of the work during those meetings.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS AND DISSEMINATION STRATEGY

Ultimately, MARPP researchers decided in partnership with school district representatives on the study team that it was most appropriate to summarize the quantitative and qualitative findings concurrently in one report, which would be made publicly available through the partnership website. While the qualitative case study findings were carefully de-identified to ensure that no school or district was revealed in the data, the quantitative findings offered comparisons across member districts. This included evidence of exclusionary discipline outcomes, subjective “D-code” infractions, and relative risk ratios (e.g., the relative likelihood of a Black student being suspended compared to all other students in a student body). Throughout the quantitative findings, analyses indicated the degree to which outcomes varied by student race and ethnicity, as well as how the racial and socioeconomic composition of the school predicted the presence of disproportionality. It also included maps indicating where evidence of disproportionality was most pronounced in the MARPP region. The qualitative findings included a discussion of themes related to how faculty and staff perceived the implementation of alternative discipline programs in their schools, supported by illustrative quotes from interviews. It also included triangulating evidence from focus groups throughout the report to ensure that student voice was prominently featured. Finally, it included individual case studies of de-identified faculty and staff observations and interviews illustrating the nuance of how they approached discipline in their classrooms, including efforts to build relationships and use referrals to administration as a last resort. The report concluded with itemized recommendations for policymakers at the federal, state, and school board levels as well as central office leadership, school-level employees, and universities training pre-service educators in how to approach school discipline.

Concurrent with the release of the public facing report on the MARPP website, researchers recorded a podcast episode with school district representatives on the study team to talk through the study design and findings and what they meant for current and upcoming discipline policies and practices in the region. The podcast was intended to help summarize findings for anyone in

the region who may not have time to read the entire report while also providing some important background context and district perspective related to the research. It was also intended as a companion episode released at the beginning of the project with members of the study team summarizing the design. MARPP also drafted a press release to highlight key takeaways from the findings along with an emphasis on the partnership aspect of the work, acknowledging that participating districts commissioned the study out of recognition that there was a need to support equitable approaches to school discipline in the region. This was, in part, in response to anticipated public criticism that could emerge from the findings.

Although there were opportunities to preview data and drafts of findings along the way, the public release of the report generated some challenges and tensions within the MARPP partnership. The report offered critical feedback related to the scope of racial disproportionality in school discipline in the region, as well as issues with fidelity and faculty and staff buy-in related to alternative discipline programs being implemented. Furthermore, while the intention of the press release was to provide context about the findings prior to public release, it also appeared to highlight some of the more critical aspects of the report and invite media attention that may have not otherwise been generated, including a public memo about discipline disparities by a US congressman. Within the MARPP partnership there was a mixed reception of the findings, with member districts acknowledging the validity of the data but also raising concerns about the choice to depict outcome comparisons between districts in a public-facing document when aggregate regional analyses could have been similarly effective in informing policy and practice. Although the project offered practical recommendations vetted by school district partners based on the evidence collected throughout the study, elements of the final report and its dissemination appeared to publicly reiterate what member districts often already realized—that racial disproportionality in school discipline was a problem that needed to be addressed.

This study ultimately provided data that helped districts take a deep and transparent look at their policies and practices related to school discipline. It also informed efforts to shift away from more reactive and punitive approaches to addressing student behavior and towards more proactive and preventative approaches. In the years following the release of the report, discipline disparities have reduced in the MARPP region, but Black, Latina/o/x, and low-income students remain more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their White, Asian, and higher-income peers (as is the case in the state in which MARPP is located as well as across the nation). From a partnership standpoint, the execution of this study and release of the final report proved to be a formative moment for MARPP, raising several questions that have informed the direction of subsequent research projects:

How Should Findings Be Structured, Contextualized, and Disseminated?

The purpose of this study was to help support a better understanding of racial equity in local school disciplinary policies and practices by offering robust, mixed-methods evidence of the landscape of disproportionality and perceived effectiveness of efforts to address it. In an effort to accomplish this in an egalitarian way, the partnership established methods for routine input from all stakeholders on the design, execution, and interpretation of the research. However, the final report and corresponding efforts to contextualize the findings resulted in tensions within the partnership. While publicly reporting comparisons between districts in disciplinary outcomes may have made sense from a scholarship or policy advocacy standpoint, from a district perspective, the public comparison piece offered less immediate and tangible benefit to their decision making. Subsequent research studies from MARPP have aggregated outcome data across the region for public reports while offering opportunities for school district partners to engage with more granular comparisons through dashboards and other resources to interact with the evidence that is pertinent to their local outcomes while making comparisons with the region as a whole.

How Can We Pursue Equity-Focused Research While Acknowledging the Particular Vulnerability of PK-12 Partners?

University researchers and K-12 partners alike within MARPP recognized the importance of addressing racial disproportionality in school discipline through in-depth, collaborative research. However, when pursuing the work and sharing the findings, K-12 partners shouldered nearly all of the criticism when the results were published. This illustrates a clear power imbalance within the partnership wherein university and PK-12 partners may similarly benefit from the research relationship, but the risk is inherently higher on the practice side. Efforts to establish egalitarian structures within this MARPP study (and others that have followed it) are a critical element to executing collaborative research. However, they may be insufficient in and of themselves for ensuring that K-12 partners have meaningful input on how and to whom the findings are disseminated as well as opportunity to share how they might impact them in the subsequent public discourse. Thus, MARPP has continually worked to build structures and procedures for empowering its member districts throughout the research process in an acknowledgment of what is at stake through their participation. This has included increased input on study design, invitations for co-authorship, and multiple forms of reporting findings both internally and publicly.

How Can We Take an Asset-Based Approach to Improving Education Systems?

Educational research often rightfully interrogates instances of deficit thinking, either in policies and structures, the treatment of participants in studies, or the language used in the reporting of findings. These ongoing efforts have led to fairer treatment of marginalized communities in the academy as well as in public school systems (although challenges persist). However, academia also often falls into the habit of exercising deficit thinking when researching and writing about PK-12 education. There are complex issues related to equity in public schools that have endured for generations, and educational research has generated corresponding scholarship building theories about why this occurs but does not always acknowledge progress made or efforts undergone by educators and leaders in PK-12 spaces to make things better. This is a missed opportunity, and one that likely contributes to research findings not being implemented in practice. RPPs like MARPP have to navigate a challenging dynamic where they serve as a “critical friend,” particularly when engaging in equity-focused research. The need persists to clearly identify inequities not only in exclusionary discipline but other academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes as well. However, when doing so, it is important to acknowledge the work currently being done by individual actors towards promoting equity within their systems, as well as the willingness of partners to come to the table to better understand how to address these generational issues through policy and practice. Improving education systems is a worthy cause of RPPs, but doing so while maintaining a trusted partnership requires an asset-based approach.

How Can RPPs Maintain Partnership Work Through Shifting Sociopolitical Contexts?

As previously noted, this study was commissioned in 2016 at a time when school districts were amplifying efforts towards addressing generational equity issues, including racial disproportionality in school discipline, through efforts such as the formation of equity committees and hiring of DEI leadership positions and teams. When the findings were released from the study in 2019, this was still a prominent point of focus in PK-12 school settings as well as in educational research and policy discourse overall. Conversations around equity in institutions like education subsequently swelled in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd in 2020. However, in the years that followed the release of the MARPP report, there has also been well-documented pushback from parents in school board meetings across the country for efforts or curricula perceived as being related to diversity, equity, or inclusion in schools. Responses to this pushback have highlighted both the similarities and differences in how university and PK-12 settings define and address issues of equity. While there has been progress

made in limiting the disproportionate use of exclusionary school discipline, the issue still persists. The challenge within an RPP context is determining how to effectively navigate generational challenges like this in PK-12 settings through shifting sociopolitical climates while acknowledging that researchers who write critical findings are often not the ones having to respond directly to public comment in school board meetings. Thus, it is imperative that RPPs between universities and PK-12 partners remain steadfastly committed to boundary crossing, particularly into public school spaces, to better understand the contexts in which studies are commissioned and findings disseminated. Otherwise, the potential for engaging in equity-focused research that leads to productive actions in favor of marginalized students may be limited.

CONCLUSION

Although important progress has been made, racial disproportionality in school discipline remains a complex and enduring issue in public education. Effectively addressing it requires a collaborative effort, as university researchers cannot resolve it through scholarship alone. Policymakers must attend to how written policies will be implemented in schools, and educational practitioners and leaders are in need of evidence-based practices. Research-practice partnerships like MARPP are well positioned to explore and address some of the most complicated and perennially persistent issues of equity in public schools but must balance the need for offering honest evidence and critique with the recognition that K-12 partners are susceptible to a level of exposure through the research that university partners are often not. This chapter offered a case study of how one RPP navigated their approach to promoting equitable school discipline within the region, including the challenges that it presented, the questions that it raised, and the changes that it catalyzed not only in how schools approached discipline but also in the structure and philosophy of the partnership itself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter focused on sustaining a relationship within a longstanding RPP through a study producing critical findings. In particular, it touched on the *equitable RPP relationships* and *equity in methods* components of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. What kinds of conversations need to be had at the onset of a study within an RPP that has the potential to produce findings that are critical? What are the implications for different stages of the study, from design through reporting?

2. How can RPPs effectively balance producing findings that are honest about challenges that exist within school systems while still offering practical and actionable solutions to those challenges? Whose voices need to be included to maximize the potential usefulness of the findings but also produce unbiased results?
3. How did the input of school district partners in the development of methods for this RPP study ultimately have implications for how the findings were received?
4. When generating findings that are potentially critical, what is the function of an RPP in acknowledging and addressing the ways that those findings might impact its members differently (e.g., in a higher education vs a PK-12 context)?
5. What does this case study illustrate about the importance of establishing and maintaining trusting relationships within an RPP, particularly when engaging in equity-focused research together?

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Theme 2: Equity in Project Design and Implementation



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A Research Practice Partnership to Accelerate Learning in Kent, WA, School District

In Search of Bright Spots

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In spring 2020, schools across the nation abruptly closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an unprecedented disruption to teaching and learning. Leaders, educators, and students grappled with a confluence of academic, emotional, financial, physical, psychological, and social stressors (Angrist et al., 2021). Consequently, conversations about learning loss began as researchers observed the emergence of performance gaps on standardized assessments (McLemore et al., 2021). For example, widely used formative assessment tools such as Curriculum Associates' i-Ready Diagnostics (Curriculum Associates, 2021a) or the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth Assessment revealed significant gaps between historical trends and 2020–21 data (Dorn et al., 2021). Importantly, some researchers highlighted that school closures and the subsequent impacts did not affect students equally. For students who were already under-resourced or more vulnerable to impacts of COVID-19 (e.g., English language learners, students from low-income communities, and those with housing insecurity), academic performance disparities grew even wider (Chang-Bacon, 2021; Dorn et al., 2020). Unfortunately, these trends have persisted, as indicated by the 2022–23 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

During the 2021–22 school year, public school districts opened at varying degrees, with some returning fully to in-person instruction and others remaining largely virtual (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2023). At that time, researchers began to shift their analysis. Rather than focusing primarily on the negative impacts of school closures, some began to adopt a more asset-based approach, highlighting the progress of specific student subgroups. For example, Curriculum

Associates examined the reading scores of over six million students who took their i-Ready assessments between August and October of 2021 and found that while a large percentage of students in early elementary tested more than two grade levels below expectations, upper-elementary and middle school students tested on grade level near pre-pandemic levels (Curriculum Associates, 2021b). Similarly, using data from over eight million students, NWEA detected a “rebounding effect” early in the 2021–22 school year as students “bounced-back” towards pre-pandemic levels at the elementary level according to their MAP Growth Assessment (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022). These large reports prompted school and district leaders to turn toward their own students and investigate their progress.

UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 CLOSURES IN KENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

In the Kent School District (KSD)—the fifth largest in Washington state—leaders became interested in their own students’ performance resulting from their experience with school closures and remote instruction. The first positive US COVID-19 case and related death occurred in Washington state, triggering an aggressive and early response that consisted of state-wide school closures—the first occurring on February 27, 2020, with a state-wide mandate following less than a month later on March 17 (Zviedrite et al., 2021). Unlike other states, many districts in Washington offered remote instruction through the spring of 2021, when the governor announced a phased approach to returning in-person (Emergency Proclamation of the Governor Amending Proclamation 21.05 No. 21–05.2, 2021). KSD operated in a fully remote model through March 2021 and was one of the last districts in the state to re-open (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). KSD staff and students continued to experience ongoing disruptions even after returning to in-person instruction as continuous COVID-19 monitoring led to classroom closures. These extenuating circumstances prompted KSD staff to explore not only how these major and ongoing disruptions impacted their students but how they affected groups differently.

Located in the greater Seattle area, KSD serves a diverse population of 25,000 students, across 42 schools and academies, who speak over 100 languages. Over 70% of the population identifies as students of color, with no single federal race/ethnicity category holding a majority status. In the 2021–22 school year, 23.8% of KSD’s student body received English language development services, and 58% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch—a proxy for socioeconomic status. KSD is incredibly proud of the diversity of its student body and greater community and reflects that pride in its core values: equity, excellence, and community. The variation in student demographics, knowledge of the widespread yet differing effects of COVID-19 and school closures, and goal of centering equity

in their inquiries motivated the researchers and analysts at KSD to spearhead an internal examination into student learning.

KSD's district office includes an administrative structure of centralized, professional teams devoted to the work of supporting schools both programmatically and operationally. Among these teams is a district-based research team, a team based in the central administration for the district dedicated to data analytics, research, and program evaluation. In 2021–22, the team consisted of three employees who focused on creating data visualizations and promoting data literacy and access throughout the district. At the time, the team wanted to take on more research-oriented projects but lacked capacity to independently launch that scope of work. Through a mutual connection, the executive director overseeing the research team introduced them to researchers at The Learning Accelerator (TLA), a national nonprofit committed to achieving education equity for all students.

TLA works across the education sector to help practitioners, leaders, and policy makers learn faster from success and innovation and then apply that knowledge to improve education. It accomplishes this goal by building partnerships, conducting research and measurement, and rapidly disseminating findings. To advance equitable visions in K-12 education, TLA works directly alongside education practitioners to bridge knowledge gaps and catalyze collective change through its research, advising, and resource-sharing, making them uniquely positioned to leverage expertise from nation-wide partners. An independent, non-partisan research team works within the organization to advance this mission by building research-practice partnerships, conducting program evaluations, and conducting their own philanthropically funded measurement projects.

Before partnering with KSD, TLA was engaged in a five-year research partnership with a rural district in California. During that time, they took a highly agile and responsive approach to support their measurement projects. When the pandemic forced that district into school closures like KSD, they embraced an asset-based approach to examining student learning, ultimately leaning into the concept of *unfinished learning* rather than *learning loss* (Holland et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on the “gaps” that might have emerged, *unfinished learning* recognizes that students may not have been able to access the material that should have been presented or the opportunity to demonstrate their level of mastery (Holland et al., 2021). The KSD research team was drawn to this approach and agreed to explore a potential research partnership.

Practitioners on their own may lack the capacity or skill to craft large-scale research projects that can lead to systems change, just as researchers may overlook relevant and pressing issues or contextual factors without the insight of applied professionals. Through a research-practice partnership (RPP), the KSD and TLA teams saw an opportunity to build research skill capacity for practitioners at KSD and enhance contextual understanding of broader research conducted by TLA.

Importantly, beyond working together, RPPs allow for each member of the partnership to share equal authority in constructing research projects and producing deliverables that can more effectively pave the way for action and transformation. From the outset, TLA's researchers were clear about their partnership approach—they could offer unique research skills, capacity, and frameworks *and* elevate the talents and knowledge of the KSD team. These initial conversations revealed the potential for a truly collaborative and reciprocal partnership. In establishing what would grow to become an RPP, the KSD assessment team was invited to join the research team given their insight, expertise, and connections to school-based practitioners. At KSD, the assessment team leads test administration and had recently adopted the goal of redefining how the district engages with testing data to consider a whole-child framework as opposed to defining student experience based on a single summative measure. They brought familiarity with the benchmark data that would be used to capture student performance and growth, and shared the goal of broadening the scope of how student performance could be defined. Members of all three teams (TLA, KSD research, and KSD assessment) aligned around a shared purpose that they co-developed through intentional conversations: to focus on the identification of promising practices that appeared to advance learning and to change the language of district evaluation such that it embraced “a diverse view of achievement” centering student growth rather than standardized proficiency.

FORMING AN RPP

Unlike partnerships where the research is often done *to* the school district by an external research organization, this project focused on nurturing *equitable relationships* such that the work occurred *together*. These traditional engagements, where research “partnerships” are more transactional, had been the previous experience of the KSD research team. External researchers would develop, implement, and analyze data on their own, later delivering results to district members, disregarding the team's own knowledge and expertise throughout the process. Alternatively, the relationship with TLA involved collaboratively designing and conducting the study, regularly adapting plans to increase buy-in and ensure that the findings would be actionable and meaningful for the district as well as the broader education sector. From the outset, TLA valued and leveraged the practical expertise of the KSD team to build data collection and analysis tools, as well as to facilitate interactions while they brought additional capacity and kept the broader, educational research field in mind.

To nurture equitable relationships and foster collaborative decision-making, TLA developed a *blueprint process*—a series of workshops to co-design research studies with partners, identifying data collection and analysis plans that are feasible and efficient, and determining strategies for socializing the work within the

partner's context. Over the course of a few months, the TLA and KSD partners met synchronously via video chat and worked asynchronously in a shared online workbook to articulate the intended purpose, objectives, and research questions to drive the study in a way that reflected their shared values of equity.

Through this process, it became clear that this partnership was unlike KSD's previous transactional research projects. Rather, it felt empowering and conducive to transformational change. For example, although a research design from previous district partnerships served as a starting point for how KSD might analyze student growth, through the blueprint process, they ultimately shifted the plans to surface more specific learnings and incorporate language that resonated with the district's needs and culture. This responsive shift by TLA early in the process was different from what previous researchers had done and showed how they valued KSD's voice. Through collaboration, equitable partnership, and an asset-based approach to measurement, the following story details how KSD engaged in a research-practice partnership with TLA to address existing systemic inequities in a way that celebrated progress and identified promising practices that might otherwise have been overlooked.

A PARTNERSHIP BUILT ON EQUITY

According to Farrell et al. (2021), two key tenets of RPPs include leveraging diverse expertise and ensuring equitable power distribution through meaningful joint work. Throughout our process, each partner's unique skills, perspectives, and strengths were leveraged as opportunities for others to learn alongside. Rather than restricting aspects of the project to those with particular expertise, team members shared their processes and research products, allowing other members to learn new skills. For instance, partners from KSD brought expertise in data visualization, prior experience examining assessment data, and an understanding of how and why the data might be used by the broader community. TLA guided the process, modeled collaborative, qualitative coding, synthesized learnings within the broader context of the K-12 education field, and introduced ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) to inform the study design. Moreover, the collaborative process allowed for equitable engagement of all members of the team. For example, some had self-proclaimed differences in processing (i.e., some members were vocal, quick thinkers while others were quiet and needed time to digest). Sensitive to these differing work styles, the partners agreed to work synchronously and asynchronously, via voice and text, to create space for everyone to contribute.

Equity in Topic

With a set of norms in place, the partners began examining KSD's reading assessment data using TLA's asset-based approach in order to understand the state of

student learning. Rather than just comparing proficiency rates across subgroups, they examined changes in scores between benchmark assessment windows to focus on measuring growth. Looking primarily at proficiency as a marker for student academic achievement and success is not unique to KSD but rather a norm in the education field since the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2002 and even earlier with passage of the initial Act of 1965. As legislation shifted in 2015 with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), growth became a more important metric for observing student academics, particularly in elementary and middle grades (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2018). As such, two big contextual factors influenced the research design: the existing data culture of analyzing proficiency and the piloting of a district-wide reading curriculum. The shift to examining growth instead of average scores would require new shared language, and the transition to a district-wide reading program would be a big change from the current state of building-specific practices.

Given the size of the student population, the partners collaboratively refined the study to make it more feasible. To do this, KSD and TLA leveraged their unique expertise. The KSD analysts brought their talents with the data visualization software, Tableau, to quickly model different growth patterns across schools and grade levels and their knowledge of district structures. Reviewing the Tableau dashboard was a new experience for TLA, who became excited by the accessibility of the data and the ease of visualizing results. Building off this capability, and incorporating learnings from a previous project, TLA then introduced Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) as a framework to illustrate how various systems and structures might be impacting student learning. The partners examined the potential influence of different structures on student growth patterns such as school assignment, race, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status. After considering these factors, the district partners identified socioeconomic status (SES) as a critical variable since a large percentage of students reside in low-income households and prior district reports had not looked explicitly at outcomes by SES.

With equity as a core district value, many leaders and staff members regularly disaggregate data by race, gender, and program. Due to its sensitive nature, SES is less publicly monitored but still a significant variable of importance in determining student experiences (Battle & Lewis, 2002; Quan et al., 2021). Additionally, the team was aware of emerging data on the influence of SES on inequities in educational access and experience during remote instruction (Agostinelli et al, 2020), thus prompting the team to explore its effects in this project. As a result of this collaboration, the partners revised their exploration of growth data across schools and grades to compare socioeconomic subgroup differences. Combining TLA's asset-based and ecological approaches with KSD's knowledge of district reading instruction, the partners ultimately decided to design a study to identify

schools where third- and sixth-grade students from low-SES backgrounds were making significant amounts of growth. In taking this approach, the partners hoped to (1) recognize and celebrate achievement in areas that were typically overlooked and (2) understand what specific factors may be related to higher growth rates to better identify supports for this vulnerable and under-resourced student population. Together, the partners deemed their research a “quest for finding and uplifting bright spots,” a term that would come to be embraced by leaders and principals.

Equity in Methods

Traditionally, KSD teams focused almost exclusively on quantitative data captured through assessment platforms. However, as the research questions became solidified through the blueprint process, TLA encouraged KSD to incorporate a qualitative strand to capture a deeper understanding of students’ learning experiences as well as contextual data that is typically missing or inaccurately conveyed in solely quantitative research (Ford & Goger, 2021). After identifying “bright spots” based on quantitative analysis of reading data, we leveraged qualitative approaches to capture on-the-ground contexts. This allowed us to enact equity through research methods, as it elevated the voices of individuals across the district.

Integrating qualitative data as a core component of the research disrupted traditional structures of knowledge generation and communication flow in the school district, too. Many K-12 districts, including KSD, tend to operate from a hierarchical structure in which information and decision-making flows primarily in one direction: from the top-down. Similarly, school-based research typically occurs when an external evaluator conducts a study, presents findings, and then leaves. By learning from experts on the ground in schools, elevating their knowledge, and enhancing existing capacity of the KSD research team through deliberate qualitative method skill-building, the qualitative design allowed the partners to shift this dynamic. In practice, this meant leveraging TLA partners to lead focus groups and create a neutral space where building leaders would feel safe to share. Inviting leaders to a separate space solely to ask them about their successes removed fear and concerns of peripheral agenda items.

It was at this stage that the partners’ collaborative skill-building truly began. Guided by TLA, the partners co-designed open-ended survey questions and focus group and interview protocols to collect qualitative responses from principal supervisors, principals, and school coaches. Focus groups prioritized inclusion of those principals and school coaches who worked in what were termed “bright spot schools,” or the schools where patterns indicated accelerated growth among students with low SES status. The partners also worked together to review and code the thematic analysis, generating consensus and validity in the data and skill-building among team members new to this type of research analysis.

The collaboration between the district partners and school-level leaders mirrored the dynamic relationship that had begun to emerge between TLA and KSD. Whereas the district partners possessed high-level knowledge about students and staff, as well as historical trends of district organizational culture, they recognized school-level staff as the experts within their buildings and leveraged this knowledge in the qualitative strand of the study. Rather than asking pre-determined questions about building practices, the partners used open-ended surveys to learn about different literacy practices and supports that might be contributing to the accelerated learning observed in reading assessment results. Leaving the questions broad and asset focused allowed for a variety of responses. Using an inductive thematic analysis technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the team extracted overarching themes that became the basis for the questions that were asked in subsequent interviews and focus groups. Having direct input from the principals enabled the partners to leverage expert knowledge that ultimately helped produce relevant research findings that more closely reflected the lived experiences of the students and educators in the district.

By July 2022, enough qualitative and quantitative data had been analyzed to compile a final report. Keeping in mind an audience of education practitioners and leaders, the partners intentionally chose to break from a traditional, academic writing style to prioritize an action-oriented tone. The final report focused on key understandings from the quantitative and qualitative themes, made recommendations for district decision-makers, and elevated voices from the KSD community who had contributed to the research findings. Roles and responsibilities for writing the final report were shared across the partnership and included individuals from both the research and assessment teams. In addition to a final report, TLA produced a strategy memo for KSD's executive leadership to frame the partners' recommendations within the context of the broader education sector. TLA also provided editorial support for both report drafts and proposals to research conferences including the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). The ease of shared writing came from the established trust built earlier in the process.

SHARING FINDINGS, CHALLENGES, AND LASTING IMPACTS

Contrary to traditional research relationships, the unique partnership between TLA and KSD allowed the school district to have greater control over the speed with which results were shared directly with stakeholders. Typically, when external researchers conduct research “on” the schools in a district, they can take months to analyze data and record findings, sometimes waiting years to release or return their findings. KSD and TLA prioritized having timely results to provide their participants so that these could inform district and school-level

decision-making. Sharing results also created the opportunity to re-engage with stakeholders and illustrate the capacity within the KSD system to support new kinds of research projects.

To engage in internal communications, the district partners defined and executed a communications plan that guided the process of sharing findings directly with key stakeholder groups within KSD. These internal communication opportunities took several forms, including sharing the final report in a district-wide leadership newsletter and direct emails to stakeholders who had contributed to the qualitative data collection, as well as targeted in-person conversations or presentations. KSD research led several conversations with key district leadership and research participants, including KSD's superintendent, associate superintendents and executives, and all elementary principals. Though the nature of each conversation differed, often discussions revolved around three things: (1) the value of growth as a new metric for understanding student performance, (2) the need to understand the fidelity of implementation for different interventions identified by bright-spot schools who demonstrated substantial student growth, and (3) the opportunities that might exist for observations of classroom and school practices going forward.

By meeting with school leaders in person and providing emailed copies of the final report, the partners facilitated an opportunity for leaders to connect and reflect on their role within the wider district system. Some leaders at bright-spot schools expressed gratitude for the acknowledgement of their work. One principal described it as "refreshing" to see their school recognized, acknowledging that they had not traditionally been recognized by the district. This engagement also facilitated connections and new project opportunities between KSD research and school leaders for future research and systems improvement, which was a goal of the research team prior to this partnership. Indeed, partnering with TLA paved the way for the team to establish the skills and build the relationships necessary to launch their own research initiatives.

Challenges

Not all aspects of the process were "bright." There were some challenges that emerged along the way, which tested the strengths of the partners' relationships. When the project first began, the KSD research and assessment teams were within the same department. Mid-way through the research project, a district-wide reorganization pulled the teams into different departments with diverging initiatives, workflows, and organizational dynamics that influenced their new priorities. Further, departments in KSD are organized in such a way that most teams operate in silos. Despite having to navigate new organizational terrain, this initial research partnership provided an opportunity for the teams to continue strengthening their bond and focusing on the parts of their work that overlapped in service of students, teachers, and school systems. Beyond the working relationship

between these two teams, this project highlighted the important work happening in buildings across the district that was directly serving the most vulnerable students. As a result, the partnership became a unifying entryway through which other district personnel could learn from leaders in buildings and unite behind their common interest of supporting the acceleration of student learning through promising practices.

Adding to the unique challenges presented by the organizational shifts for KSD, research-practice partnerships create a new way of working that can often be difficult for practitioners. Reviewing growth data, engaging school staff, and creating avenues to center equity in analysis were major priorities of the KSD research and assessment teams, but not their only ones. In addition to this research partnership project, KSD teams were expected to fulfill their regular responsibilities of being responsive to emails and phone calls, supporting access to myriad platforms, ensuring students complete required assessments, conducting district-wide trainings, pulling data reports, maintaining over 20 school-facing data dashboards, among many other things. The KSD teams were also small, totaling seven employees across both teams, which can be challenging in scaling research projects and maintaining those routine responsibilities. Time and intentionality are major resources that go into nurturing an RPP, which should not be taken lightly for practitioners who do not typically conduct research full time. KSD made this partnership succeed because of the longitudinal time the team invested and the alignment of valuing equity between KSD staff and TLA researchers who understood their lived realities and prioritized the relationship above the study.

Next Steps and Lasting Impacts

As the collaboration between KSD and TLA continued month after month, it expanded from identifying patterns of growth to understanding systemic opportunities for improvement, including true collaborative engagement. The bright spots project illustrated KSD's internal capacity to conduct research, laying the foundation for the creation of an annual cycle of strategic research and program evaluation that would be led by the research team. Even after the completion of the "bright spots" project, partners continued to meet and discuss opportunities for future collaboration, including newfound evaluation opportunities. An initial evaluation project includes a longitudinal implementation evaluation, with a focus on a new district-wide reading curriculum. As a trusted partner, TLA will help guide this research at KSD. Through their blueprint process and team building with new KSD district teams, TLA has helped KSD research design this new evaluation project, engage new staff members and teams, and will continue to provide strategic support for this new project.

In addition to their continued partnership with TLA, the KSD research team has been able to apply their learnings from the partnership and increase their

capacity to conduct their own research from a participatory lens. In separate projects following the RPP, KSD research adopted a similar process as modeled through the RPP to conduct research with other district- and school-based teams. Some of these projects included empowering students to act as lead researchers and direct the focus of a study. Beyond increasing capacity for the research team to run projects, engaging in an RPP solidified the importance of prioritizing the voices of school community members in district-sponsored research. Greater equity in research practices resulted in building capacity across the KSD system for more stakeholders, including students, to access the knowledge, skills, and tools to shape future research work.

CONCLUSION

RPPs function to disrupt the traditional transactional relationships between researchers and practitioners (Penuel et al., 2015). As such, at the heart of an RPP is a movement to shift the focus of who creates knowledge valuable to the wider community. The RPP between KSD and TLA exemplifies this disruption through their non-traditional relationship, one based in equity of methods, decision-making, and effort, and through their focus on elevating and honoring community voices. For KSD, their partnership with TLA opened multiple new perspectives. Working with a nonprofit possessing national scope and professional experience helped KSD to integrate that perspective—changing how district leadership thought about students and normalizing the asset-based language. The KSD research and assessment teams benefitted from honing their research skills and adopting processes modeled during their partnership. For TLA, working with KSD helped them to further their mission of catalyzing collective change in education and their understanding of effective tools and processes for working with district partners. While the skills on both sides of the partnership have expanded, importantly, so did motivations to intentionally look for and create opportunities to elevate community voice and partnership.

Central to these successes lies a sense of trust built between partners from a shared belief in the outcomes of the work—that through listening to and elevating knowledge from community voices, meaningful and systemic change can occur. During a period in education known for its deficit language, embracing an asset-based approach to research and building a shared definition and value in equity work served as a pivotal first step in establishing that trust. Next, by embracing a mixed-methods design, the partners created opportunities to capture and uplift community knowledge and honor practitioner experience. Finally, by communicating findings in a style and language reflective of a nonacademic audience, the partners centered the research participants as key stakeholders in the delivery of research results.

KSD is fortunate to be situated in a state and political context that celebrates and supports equity pursuits. However, support does not always mean there is ample guidance, leadership, or practical solutions to engaging in the work. Partnerships between practitioners and non-profits like TLA allow for progress to take place, in a timely manner, in a way that resonates with and serves the community. The disruptions to how KSD had traditionally experienced research studies were largely made possible due to the agility of a non-profit organization, whose work functions are mission-driven, flexible, and practitioner-focused. It was also made possible by empowering the work of a practitioner team, attuned to its community's needs. Ultimately, though, this trust was the central component underpinning the RPP and driving a lasting relationship.

Since the 2021–22 school year, a lot has changed for KSD. Remote learning for all students and daily COVID tests have become memories from what feels like a distant past. More organizational shifts have occurred, and a new strategic plan has surfaced new priorities for KSD teams. While the impacts of COVID are still being observed, and some have yet to be discovered, KSD teams are continuing to pursue collaboration, research, and equity in their newly increased capacity for strategic research and evaluation, thanks to their partnership with TLA. Projects, priorities, and even organizational teams may continue to change, yet the KSD research team and TLA continue to prioritize collaboration, engagement, power disruption, and equity in their work to surface student strengths and school bright spots.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter focused on incorporating the perspectives of multiple stakeholders throughout the research design and implementation process. In particular, it touched on the *equity in topic* and *equity in methods* components of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. How should RPPs ensure that researchers leverage (rather than overlook) the expertise of their school district partners?
2. How might RPP researchers focus on issues of equity as opportunities to find and uplift “bright spots” as described in the chapter?
3. How can RPPs take an asset-based approach to equity-focused research?
4. How does taking an asset-based approach help an RPP navigate inevitable challenges that emerge throughout a project?
5. The chapter describes lessons learned by both the R and P side. In what ways do these lessons resonate with those learned in the RPPs described in the other chapters or your own experience?

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The Value of Pivoting

Equity-Centered Lessons Learned in a Research-Practice Partnership Between Rural Districts and a Research- Focused Non-Profit

*Merijke Coenraad, Emi Iwatani, Kyle Dunbar,
Neil Arnett, Mike Bell, Sarah Blackburn,
Amy Newsome, Traci Tackett, and Aileen Owens*

Our research-practice partnership (RPP) was created in 2019 to strengthen teacher capacity for K-8 computing education in eastern Kentucky. The state and national need for such efforts is well acknowledged. As technology becomes increasingly prominent in society, it is important for students to be computationally literate and understand not only how to use computers but also have the skills and knowledge about how they work to critique their impact on society and problem solve using computational solutions (Mills et al., 2021). Yet access to computing classes remains disproportional, including for students from rural areas. Currently, only 76% of students in rural school districts in Kentucky have access to a foundational computer science (CS) course in high school. This rate of access is below that of both their urban and suburban counterparts (Code.org, CSTA, & ECEP Alliance, 2023). The needs at the K-8 levels have also been pronounced, with elementary teachers in rural settings reporting lower levels of computational thinking (CT) skills than those in urban settings (Kale et al., 2018). Kentucky has highlighted the need for CT K-12 amongst other computing skills in their Academic Standards for Technology (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.). The need for computing education within eastern Kentucky was identified by educational and community leaders within the area and led to the formation of our RPP.

Eastern Kentucky is located in the mountains of central Appalachia, where, like many rural places in the United States and around the world, there is rich

culture, community wealth, and history on the one hand and some dire needs and collective trauma to be addressed on the other hand. The area in which our districts, Floyd County Schools and Pikeville Independent Schools, are located has been designated as “remove-fringe” by the National Center for Education Statistics locale framework, and the median community income is approximately \$37,000 according to the 2018–2022 American Community Survey, about half the national and 60% of Kentucky’s median income. While the districts are in neighboring counties, their contexts differ. Pikeville Independent is a small district (around 1,100 students) and is located in a small town with both a university and a hospital. Within the district, 39% of students receive free or reduced price lunch. Floyd County Schools is a larger district serving the entire county with a student enrollment of around 6,000, and 79% of students in Floyd County receive free or reduced priced lunch. Across both districts, the majority of students are white (92%+) and are from English-only households (98%+). District administrators and local community members believe that the majority of students’ and teachers’ families have been impacted by the collapse of the coal industry directly. In Floyd County, 15% of parents have bachelor’s degrees or higher, and in Pikeville Independent, 42% of parents have such degrees. From the project’s start, the research side aspired to be responsive to cultural values that were promoted by local workforce leaders, especially those depicted in the Appalachian Ingenuity video (Google, 2018) and in the Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR) Blueprint (SOAR, 2018). Such values included love of their place, grit, love of family, faith, and dignity of work. We were also mindful that computing education could be seen as being in tension with some of these values, taking away the best and brightest to leave to work in big cities.

The initial desire for our two RPP partner districts, to bolster computing education at the primary level, came partly as a result of several of us (including Tackett, Arnett, and other educators such as Denise Isaac from Floyd County Schools) visiting a mature science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM)/CS pathway in a school district in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania built by Owens around 2018 and seeing the opportunities for problem-solving and career connections such a pathway could provide. These initial visits turned into a friendship among us on the practice side and eventually a connection with Digital Promise researchers. We formed an RPP between the two school districts in eastern Kentucky (Floyd County Schools and Pikeville Independent Schools), Digital Promise (a global education nonprofit working with educators, researchers, technology leaders, and communities), Owens (an educational leader around CT pathways and the initial connection between the research-side and practice-side partners), and Tackett, who has served as a site director and RPP broker to various business and cultural partners (e.g., Bit Source, AccelerateKY, Remake Learning Days). Together we sought to find a National Science Foundation (NSF)

grant to create and study CT pathways in Floyd County Schools and Pikeville Independent Schools with Owens' district (South Fayette School District) serving as a mentor.

Our work began in 2019 with the NSF-funded CS for All grant, *Tough as Nails, Nimble Fingers: Developing a K-8 Coding Pathway for Kentucky Appalachia*, focused on building the districts' CT pathways and building local capacity for CS and CT integration and education. The work has continued through a second NSF CS for All grant, *Drawing on Kinship: Rurally Sustaining Computational Thinking Pathways*, which focuses on integrating community knowledge, heritage, and problem solving into the CT pathway. It has been important for us to work as an RPP. From the beginning, aligned with the revised definition of RPPs eventually proposed by Farrell et al. (2021), our aim was to collaborate on transformation goals, and we had structures and norms in place to calibrate power dynamics and draw upon our diverse forms of expertise. For example, our express intention from the beginning was to support the "future of work" and economic revitalization in eastern Kentucky, almost all our project meetings have had practice- and research-side representation, we meet frequently and regularly to make decisions, when in doubt we defer to the practice-side, and we have an agreement that any public communication about the project must be reviewed by the eastern Kentucky side (generally Tackett).

Yet, as we describe in this chapter, we also have grown a lot together, with more and more productive "pivots" becoming possible as our history of working together grew. In the following section, we expand on the idea of pivots within our RPP in relation to the Navigating Equity in RPP Design Framework. Then, we share three examples of pivots within our RPP. The first pivot represents a pivot taken by our practice-side partners, the second is a pivot taken by our research-side partners, and the third is a pivot we took as a full team. Each pivot is told in the first person by one or more RPP team members representing that side of the partnership, with each section labeled by the RPP team member/author perspective it takes.

EXAMINING PIVOTS IN OUR RPP THROUGH THE NAVIGATING EQUITY IN RPP DESIGN FRAMEWORK

We have found pivots in both mindset and actions are necessary when working across distance and difference, particularly when centering equity within our RPP and work. Encouraging and expecting pivots has been an important methodological perspective for both research- and practice-side activities. For the practice side, Owens (based on her experiences lending a series of innovations in districts) has introduced a "little bets approach" to encourage K-12 teachers and administrators to take calculated risks where the cost of failure is small, the potential rewards are large, and building on small successes could lead to larger

impacts. For example, a teacher trying a 30-minute computing-integrated lesson or a district incorporating robotics as an after school program. The idea (adopted from the book *Little Bets* (Sims, 2011)) is that promoting this change-oriented “little bets” mindset (reportedly common to many successful entrepreneurs) in educators is helpful, as it can cumulatively lead to large and sustainable change. From the research side, the idea of being open to pivots comes from the epistemological humility that is assumed in social science inquiry approaches such as design-based research (Barab & Squire, 2004; DBR Collective, 2003), culturally responsive evaluation and assessment (Hood, 1998; Hood et al., 2015) and RPPs (Farrell et al., 2021). In all of these approaches, it is assumed that the research-side partners have a lot to learn even with regard to some foundational things such as what counts as evidence.

This mentality of pivoting has supported our team to address and navigate tensions that arise naturally during collaboration. While pivoting required open, sometimes long, team conversations and not every pivot was without some discomfort or disagreement, overall we have found the results of pivoting to be positive, and we believe that pivoting led to improved outcomes and impact within our work. Yet our team has acknowledged that pivoting has led to team members taking some calculated risks before the pivot could occur or as a result of the pivot (e.g., trying a new type of lesson, adapting or trying new research methodologies). Pivots in mindset have included how we individually or collectively think about motivations for our work and combating internalized stereotypes and assumptions that we bring to the work. Pivots in actions have included changing the modality of our professional development due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in roles and responsibilities over time, particularly as team capacity has grown. These pivots have occurred due to systemic factors and in response to evolving project needs and outcomes. They were made possible because of our commitment to having a long-term partnership and the time over which we had and were planning to work together.

In this chapter, we examine these pivots using the Navigating Equity in RPP Design framework (Chapter 1, this book). This framework centers equity within RPPs and highlights the interplay between actors, structures, and ideas within RPP work and the power dynamics that impact these factors across five interconnected elements of RPP project design. Using these elements, we consider how pivots within the project were in service of forming trusting and equitable relationships among partners, developing and maintaining a shared language of equity, the identification and articulation of the RPP project topic and centering humanity and equity in this process, centering equity in the project goals, and attending to equity in the methodology. In the following sections, we present three significant pivots in mindset and action that our team has taken while working together over the last six years and then talk about how those pivots embody multiple parts of the framework. Considering the different team members within

our project, we share one practice-side focused pivot, one research-side focused pivot, and one pivot that involved our whole team written from the first-person perspective of the individuals experiencing the pivot. We share these pivots in this way to provide an overview of both our mindsets and actions leading up to and as a result of our pivots. We hope sharing these pivots highlights how pivoting can be a beneficial move for RPP teams and how to manage pivots, which will be necessary for all RPPs, while working toward more equitable RPP practices.

PRACTITIONER PIVOT: FROM MANAGING THE DAY TO DAY TO PERMISSION TO EXPERIMENT AND EXPLORE

Amy Newsome, Floyd County Schools

I have been part of this RPP from the very beginning and haven't missed a summer institute yet! As a middle school science teacher, I took part in the school visit in fall 2019 to see an example CT pathway in Pittsburgh and attended STEAM/CT professional development (PD) each summer. Starting last year, I've moved to becoming a district digital learning coach where my role in the project is to support teachers who are implementing project-based learning experiences that integrate heritage and CT.

A major pivot I've made because of this project is that I've tried new things in my classroom. A lot of times as a teacher, I did not use what I learned at the PD that I attended. But the Summer Institute was more interesting than most PDs I'd attended, and I was more likely to use what I learned because I could see the value of it. Knowing that there was a research project attached to it also spurred me to use the things I learned at Summer Institute in the classroom. Working with researchers has focused me more because I know that I don't want to let them down. If it was just me in my classroom, I'm liable to let it go by the wayside because I'm a chaos coordinator managing a lot of day-to-day activities. The RPP keeps me focused and keeps me motivated to do it because if I commit to something, like I committed to researchers to integrate CT, then I'm more likely to carry it out with fidelity because I know I am being watched. For me, that sense of accountability or being watched has not been negative. We've been together for so long, and I feel like I have grown leaps and bounds through our relationship, not only my ability to teach, but in my leadership abilities as well. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that researchers were there to guide me. It has been very, very valuable, and I have learned a lot from that process.

Neil Arnett, Pikeville Independent Schools

As the technology coordinator for our district and one of the founders of this project, I have always been a longitudinal thinker, considering how something will affect the next three or five years, but working on this RPP has changed some

of the ways that our district and I have approached strategic planning. We have had to think long term in a different way, considering a greater number of details three or more years out rather than having a nebulous picture of what something might look like. Typically, we are throwing things at the wall each year to see how they go—what we try is reactive to what is happening in the moment. With the RPP, we have been able to have a more detailed long-term big picture while still being able to make changes based on what is needed day to day. As we are planning, working with the researchers has given us license to try new things and see what happens—this is part of the process of the research.

To support the new things that we are trying in the district and making the changes that are needed day to day, we have been able to collaborate with the researchers in a consistent feedback loop. Over the last five years, we have had constant feedback coming into our school and classrooms from our research partners. This has come in the form of consistent meetings together as a group as well as checking in and sharing information that we are learning together. A lot of times, the research partners pose questions that we, as practitioners, don't normally stop and think about. By posing the questions, our research partners help us to pause for a second to think about what we are doing, which brings clarity over the course of the project rather than only retrospectively. We are able to take our long-term plans and constantly examine what we thought would happen, what actually happened, why it might have happened, and what changes we might need to make. It's a constant cycle of reflection and change. For us, it has been very important that feedback is made more valuable by being timely and as part of a conversation. All in all, the planning, feedback, and asking questions have helped us to focus less on just putting out fires in our day to day and more about purposefully trying new things and then thinking about them and how they went.

Sarah Blackburn, Pikeville Independent Schools

Like Amy, I first participated in this RPP as a middle school science teacher. For me, attending the RPP professional development inspired significant changes to my curriculum and gave me the push that I needed to try something different. After participating in my first Summer Institute, I changed my very first unit into a data science unit to introduce sixth graders to the process of science, focused around how science is all about data.

As a teacher, I can be really hard on myself and a perfectionist. I've also had to deal with the pressure of meeting standards and testing, but being part of this RPP gave me the opportunity to try something different, which is how I think that we improve education. I knew that the research team, as scientists, were not judging the outcome for whether it is good or bad but rather whether something works or not and why. In education, when you are in the trenches, you've got many different entities with set strategies or programs that they are trying to sell

or promote. The research team is separated from that. They are observing, helping us, seeing what works and doesn't work. It is really helpful to reflect with the researchers knowing that they have the primary goal of observing practices within the schools and district leadership while providing expert advice when requested by those leaders. Because of this, I feel that I can bring ideas and we can have conversations in a place where no one is pushing a specific strategy, curriculum, or tool. Instead, it's all about what is working and what we can do to improve.

Practitioner Pivot Reflection

On the practice side, we are often focused on the day to day of classroom and district needs. Working with researchers on this RPP has been a motivation to pivot from a focus on managing the everyday by getting an opportunity to focus on the long-term and having outside permission to tinker and try new things. These practice-side pivots toward exploration and experimentation have led to our RPP *forming trusting and equitable relationships among partners*. While our initial motivations for experimentation were, at least in part, that we didn't want to let the research-side partners down, the encouragement from our research-side partners also gave us permission to try things we thought would improve learning for our students, helped us to learn valuable new topics and pedagogical strategies, and created an opportunity to receive valuable feedback from the research-side partners. Our initial pivots to trying new things and the positive results that it had for us and our students led us to have more trust in our research-side partners and become even more open to exploration, more likely to implement with fidelity, and willing to provide honest feedback to the research-side partners. Our willingness to give honest feedback to the research-side partners and advocate for what we believe is best for ourselves and our students then helped the research side learn more and understand our perspectives as practice-side partners. Together we were then able to move together towards identifying next steps and experiments that better suit practice-side interests and capacities in alignment with the research agendas of our partners and the larger research community. Overall, this pivot has encouraged more equitable relationships among the research-side and practice-side partners where both sides are self-motivated to contribute to our partnership goals in meaningful ways.

RESEARCHER PIVOT: TESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF OUR INTERNALLY HELD METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Merijke Coenraad and Emi Iwatani, Digital Promise

In spring 2024, just 1–2 months before the time of our writing, the Digital Promise research team (Iwatani and Dunbar) and a retired teacher and local education

consultant who serves as a broker in our RPP (Tackett) had the opportunity to visit each district's public student showcase and see the results of teachers implementing their CT and heritage integrated project-based learning (PBL) lessons. The way in which research- and practice-side partners became intertwined in roles and activities was something that illustrates a unique and salient pivot we've had to make as career researchers.

While we generally led the teacher interviews we conducted on this visit, the district leaders were welcome to listen in to their teachers' stories of the year and chime in with context and follow-up questions.¹ During the student showcases, Iwatani, Dunbar, and Tackett used a co-created observation instrument to learn from students about their projects and collect notes and observations about each presentation. Following the interviews and showcase, we organically found pockets of time with the practice-side partners and started debriefing to make sense of what we were learning. While a lot was going on that day (for example, at the Floyd County Schools Innovation Summit, Bell and Newsome were directing over 300 students, as well as educators, state dignitaries, robots, virtual reality experiences, farm animals, tractors, etc.), we debriefed after the interviews, after the summit, and during walks to our cars.

Upon returning from the site visit, we on the research side immediately started analyzing the data to understand how the teachers had integrated our project focal components (heritage, storytelling, and CT) into their lessons. Then, within two weeks, the full team met and started to discuss where these components were and were not present and how this might impact the upcoming summer professional learning institute. While the research results were still preliminary, the team was able to start to make sense of them together and think about how they could be put into practice immediately, with updates possible as formal coding progressed. Here again, it was not just the research side processing data and identifying implications. Two of the district administrators (practice side) led the development of a model of how to visualize where each project landed and support teachers to place their own work to reflect on what they accomplished (progression of the model conceptualization shown in Figures 7.1–4). By creating grounded, inductive categories for different types of lessons, the entire project team was able to pull out trends and think about implications for teacher reflection and future professional learning. Within a week of the practice-side partners creating a model everybody liked (Figure 7.4), the research/broker side test-drove it for a teacher case analysis by using it to analyze projects for their inclusion of the four elements based on teacher interviews.

Researcher Pivot Reflection

This way of almost blurring the distinction of research and practice represents some major pivots for us as researchers, generally in service of improving *equity in the methodology*. For one of us (Coenraad), a big shift was seeing how RPP

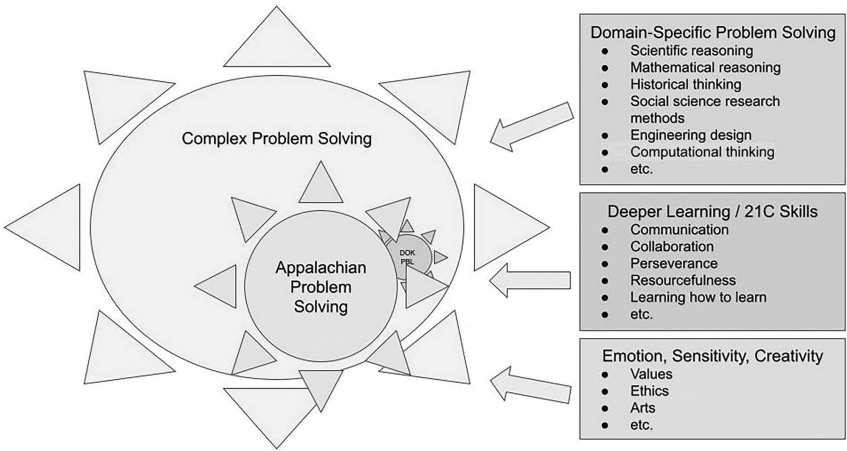


Figure 7.1 Models and Conceptualizations Shared by Iwatani, Coenraad, Dunbar (research side), and Tackett (RPP broker) in a Team Meeting Prior to Site Visit

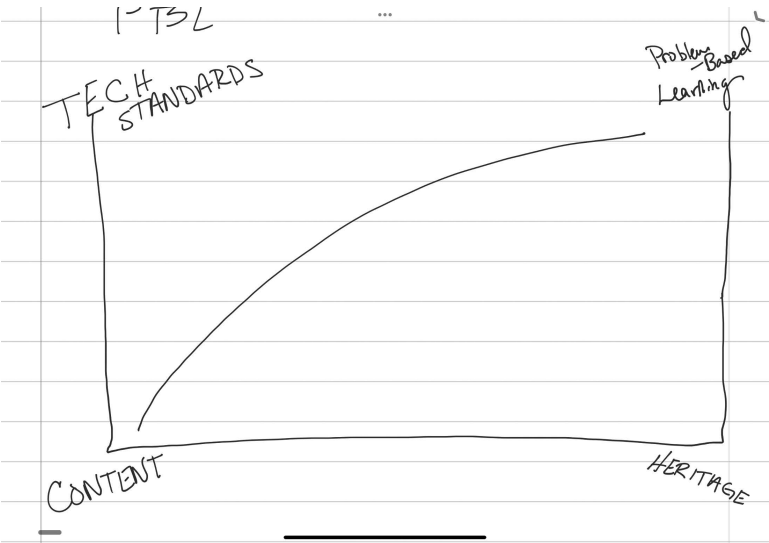


Figure 7.2 Initial Conceptual Model Shared by Arnett (practice side) in a Team Meeting After the Site Visits

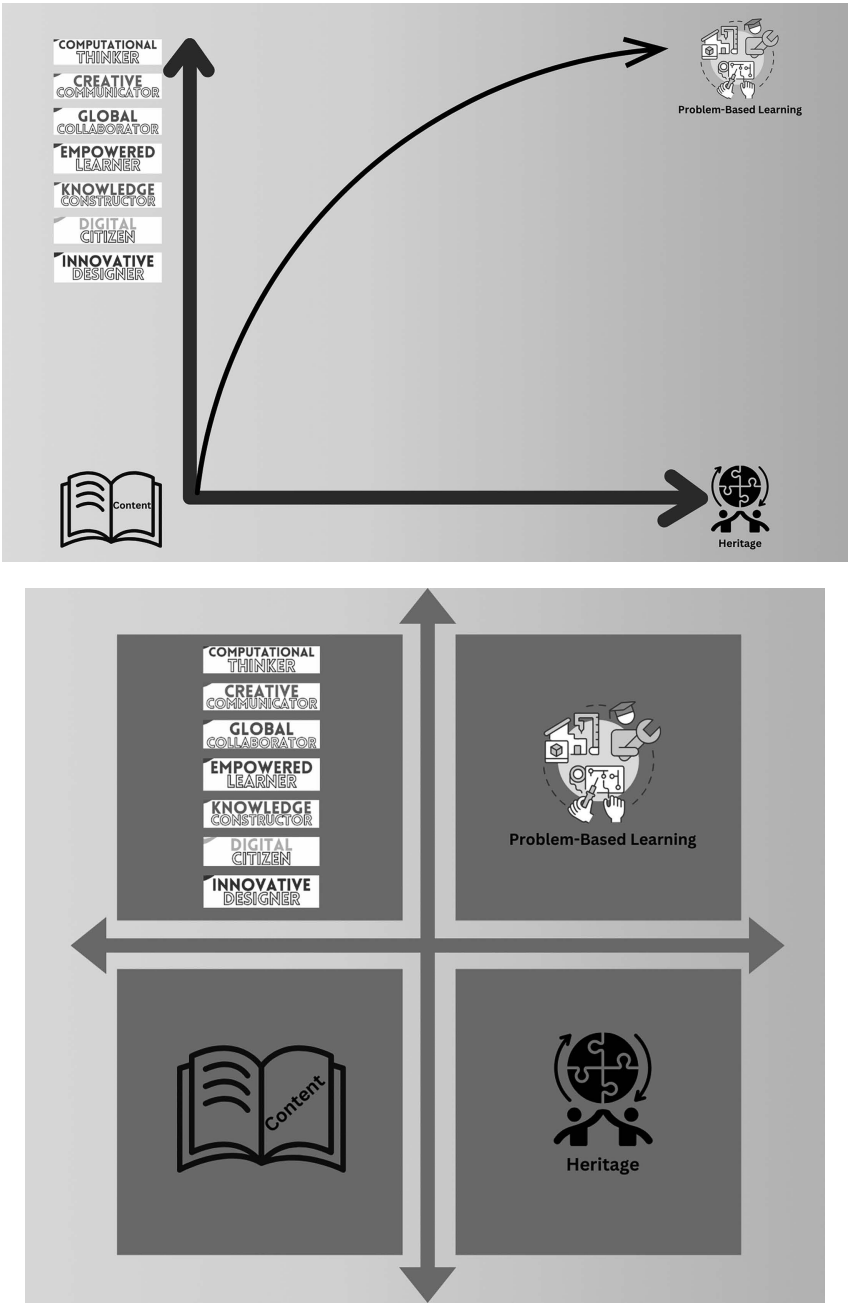


Figure 7.3 Possible Conceptual Models Shared by Arnett via Email After Initial Discussion

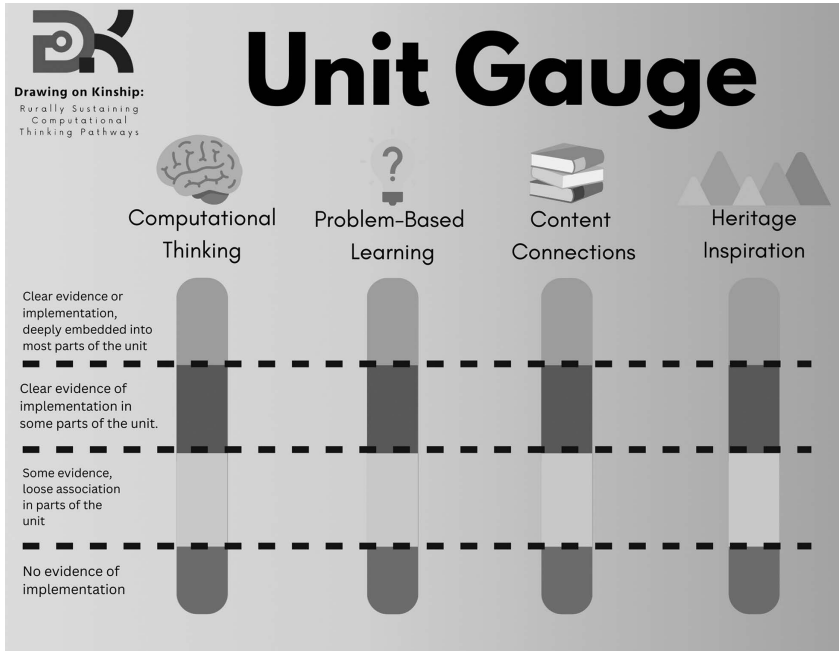


Figure 7.4 Refined “Unit Gauge” Model Created by Arnett and Blackburn (practice side) After Further Discussion. Incorporates Elements of All Prior Models and Discussions With Practical Application in Mind and Is Being Used in a Teacher Case Analysis

research can produce immediate and consequential results for our practice-side partners rather than needing to reach a point where the analysis felt “done” or “polished” before sharing it. This shift has involved having to be less of a purist in terms of classical research methods—which has at times felt uncomfortable. For example, when implementing surveys about student and parents’ expectancy value around CT and problem-solving, we created reports that would update aggregated data in the moment as students and parents took the survey and shared these reports with practice-side partners, collecting initial thoughts from research-side and practice-side partners in our regular meetings as the data were being collected. This stood in contrast to other work where I compiled final data into slides to facilitate sense-making conversations. While both these practices provided opportunities to share data with practice-side partners and learn from their perspectives, sharing data in the moment meant qualitative questions were not examined initially with a formal codebook, and impressions were based on graphics without knowledge of statistical significance. These analyses would be completed later. The informal viewing of data together allowed opportunities

to better understand the contextual challenges and opportunities that could be leading to the results. Overall, we believe practices such as these have supported higher-quality research results, especially in terms of improving the significance and impact of the findings.

Related, for the other of us (Iwatani), a mental shift was about realizing the extent to which practice-side partners can sometimes willingly and helpfully take on a researcher persona. One memorable moment was after we had reviewed a parent survey as a team, where I had mentioned a worry that parents may rate every academic topic on our list “very important” and make it difficult for us to understand change over time. In the next meeting, one of the practitioners shared that she had “been thinking about the parent survey question all night” and proposed using a 100-point slider so we have a better chance of understanding both the absolute and relative importance of these topics to parents. This somehow surprised me, probably because I had assumed practitioners would be invested in the content of the survey but not as much the methods. We implemented this suggestion, and it has served us well. Because of interactions like this, I have shifted my facilitation to be more inviting of “researcher-type” input from practitioners, which has felt enjoyable—as if our research team expanded in capacity and richness of perspective.

TEAM PIVOT: FROM DEVELOPING CT SKILLS TO CULTIVATING COMMUNITY NARRATIVES INCLUSIVE OF CT

Our work began with the premise that future-ready skills and competencies are the keys to economic development and community healing. We aimed to teach students CT, so they may have mindsets and skills to survive and thrive in a technological future, and be able to stay in eastern Kentucky if they so wish. If students and the people in eastern Kentucky learn CT competencies, we surmised, they will be able to secure better jobs, have a good life, and support economic revitalization. Our initial teacher professional development therefore focused on confidence and skill building for teachers to integrate CT into the classroom.

It was not until two years into the project, when Rusty Justice, one of the conceptual founders of our project, pointed out the critical importance of “narrative development,” that we began to see the need to broaden our perspective regarding the role and emphasis of the project. Justice is an entrepreneur and business owner who has been engaged in local workforce development for many years. Speaking on a panel aimed to deepen teachers’ understanding about the relevance of CT education, he shared: Not only do K-8 teachers have an important job in cultivating talent and skills, but they can also play a unique and important role in developing asset-based community narratives, and the latter is just as important as the former. Justice mentioned the harmful effects of internalizing negative stereotypes about

Appalachia and suggested the importance of teaching “the possibility narrative, not the victim narrative” of eastern Kentucky. Such a narrative is not just about students expecting that they can succeed in CT and other domains but also more fundamentally about feeling value and pride in who they are and where they are from.

There is theory to support the importance of asset-based, possibility-oriented mindsets to healing in psychology (Nezu & Nezu, 2018) and civic development (Jenkins et al., 2020; MIT REAP, 2024). Skills and know-how are useful to community revitalization only if people apply them towards designing a shared community future, and for that they have to imagine a possible future that they are a part of and feel a sense of agency towards its design (Jenkins et al., 2020). Additionally, Justice’s perspective carried weight for us because he had been concerned and invested in local economic revitalization for many years and had accumulated a deep wealth of knowledge about the topic both through his professional experiences and through learning from national and international leaders. For example, prior to the project, he had brought varied groups of people together for a “Listening and Problem Solving Tour” to discover how to build digital learning into central Appalachia and to bring tech companies into the region. These conversations included members from Massachusetts Institute of Technology Comparative Media Studies and Carnegie Mellon University Computer Science Department, K-12 leaders such as Tackett and Owens, and regional workforce development leaders who are part of SOAR. Our education RPP came about because in these ways, Justice, Owens, and other workforce and education leaders had invested several years into creating a theory of change for local economic revitalization and had identified locally responsive and globally informed ways in which educators play an essential role.

So as a team, we pivoted to focus more on community narrative development. For most of us, this felt like a natural and obvious path to explore not only because it was suggested by respected community and project leaders but because its rationale made sense and resonated with every educator (teacher and administrator) with whom we shared it, and it felt aligned with our goal to take a culturally responsive approach to our RPP. We began by continuing to invite local speakers to inspire teachers with “possibility narratives.” We started with people we knew, expanded to second-hand contacts, and began to add field trips. Through these efforts, we have exposed teachers to over two dozen local ingenuity stories, such as a story about a high school student who helped turn his favorite local guitar store into a successful e-commerce business, a local musician who composes digital music for famous artists, and an apple orchard located on a reclaimed coal mine. Some of these stories have been translated into student-friendly two-pagers (available at: bit.ly/CTKinship), which teachers have subsequently used in their classrooms.

At the same time, the project supported participants to reflect, cultivate, and communicate new narratives for themselves and their work as educators.

One early exploration was about how Tara Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005) applied to eastern Kentucky. The discussion by education leaders on this topic (Iwatani et al., 2021) was a watershed moment for our project, where we started to imagine CT in the context of a variety of local assets (e.g., kinship, aspirational capital, maker/tinkerer heritage). This helped us decide to have all project teachers explore their role in sparking ingenuity. We had them tell stories about ingenuity in their own families, imagine how students may apply their ingenuity as grown-ups, and create narratives about their role as K-8 educators who support those students (Slone, 2023). We also encouraged teachers to integrate storytelling into their CT projects.

In such ways, our project has shifted from a focus on individual CT skill development to one focused on cultivating community narratives and identifying where CT may support the realization of such narratives. This pivot can be described as in the service of *identification and articulation of the RPP project topic and centering humanity and equity in this process*. Our initial conversations and investigations tended to just be around “how are we incorporating CT (data practices, algorithms, modeling)?”, whereas in recent years we are asking “how are we incorporating CT, heritage inspiration, and problem-based learning”? The shift has helped our project goals to increase in local relevance and significance and increase possibilities of intellectual merit and broader impacts.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PIVOTS WHEN NAVIGATING EQUITY IN RPP DESIGN

We conclude by exploring how the major pivots we've described work in conjunction with one another toward a more equitable RPP, in alignment with the Navigating Equity in RPP Design framework. Above all, our pivots have served to *form and strengthen trusting and equitable relationships among partners*. Whether it was a practice-side shift to try to implement a new lesson or a research-side shift to engage in analytic discussions before the data were completely “clean” and under control, a significant part of that risk-taking was motivated by each team member's desire to contribute our talents towards a greater RPP goal and to be of service to our partners. This has invited continual curiosity towards, and celebration of, the capacity, knowledge, and talents that each team member brings. We found that watching our partners pivot and try new things on our behalf has had a profound effect on strengthening our relationship. Beyond the team-building exercises and development of shared norms, which were important for our RPP in the beginning, trying new “little bets” to support partners has been an essential relationship-building approach within our RPP that we encourage others to consider. The process of identifying pivot points that are needed and making the pivots together has strengthened our relationships, and, while we expect to continue to keep needing to make pivots,

particularly pivots in our actions, as our project continues, we are better able to do so because of these relationships.

The deeper relationships, in turn, catalyze pivots in service of *centering equity in the project goals* and *attending to equity in the methodology*. Yes, our RPP started with many important shared goals (e.g., “train teachers using a successful existing model and study takeaways”), but before we knew each other well, these were necessarily big-picture sketches. With stronger relationships and a longer history together, we gained more detailed understandings of each other’s needs and aspirations, which allowed for concrete refinements of our goals so that they are more relevant to both practice and research (e.g., “train teachers at summer institute through storytelling and experiential learning, specifically about integrating CT into problem-based learning, and look out for ways to support teachers during the school year”). These more specific and jointly relevant goals have necessitated all parties involved trying new things, including applying new methodologies in our research and practice, and in some cases for our roles to intertwine and merge. Our RPP has leveraged our relationships and collaboratively refined goals to jointly come up with tailored and relevant methodologies that serve a variety of partner needs both when enacted and in detailed study.

Stronger alignment in project goals and methodologies catalyze the creation and use of *a shared language of equity* and continual pivots towards *identifying and articulating the RPP project topic and centering humanity and equity in this process*. Because working in the RPP has encouraged our districts to pivot to be more strategic, experimental, and reflective, we have stretched ourselves to focus more on community-centered topics—defining equity for our students from a standpoint of both ensuring students have access to computing and future economic opportunities but also that they can see the positive aspects of their community and value the local heritage of making and innovation. We have collectively defined equity within the project around a celebration of community assets and providing opportunities for students to make decisions about the work they are doing and see authentic connections to their lives outside of school. This has translated into our project topic, particularly in our second grant together, Drawing on Kinship. Relying on the strong relationships that we have built, our project team has been able to pivot to ensure the project topic not only aligns with research agendas nationally but also aligns with the wants, needs, and desires of the community.

CONCLUSION

For our RPP team, it has not always been smooth or straightforward to work across the distance and difference that we bring to the project. We have needed to build strong relationships to ensure that all partners can participate equitably within our RPP and together we can work toward the best interest of students.

By making pivots continuously within our work, we have been able to align our topic, language of equity, goals, and methodology in a more equitable RPP design. Assuredly, our RPP team will need to continue to make pivots as we continue to work together, but as we know from our practice-side experience, educators are used to pivots and need to make them everyday. As we continue to make pivots mentally and logistically, individually and as a group, we aim to continue to center equity to ensure that we are moving towards more equitable working relationships, more equitable project goals, and, in turn, more equitable educational opportunities for students.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter focused on the “pivots” required to facilitate a successful RPP in a rural setting that focuses on culturally responsive computing pathways. In particular, it touched on the *shared language of equity*, *equity in topic*, and *equity in project goals* components of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. What do you think are the key factors that necessitate the “pivots” mentioned in the chapter when collaborating across cultural and geographic differences? Can you discuss specific examples of pivots that were particularly impactful or challenging?
2. How does the concept of culturally responsive-sustaining computing pathways influence the effectiveness of the RPP? In what ways do the authors suggest that cultural responsiveness can enhance collaboration among diverse stakeholders?
3. The chapter emphasizes the importance of being open minded and flexible. How can project teams prepare for the psychological and logistical challenges associated with making these hard pivots? What strategies might be effective in fostering this adaptability?
4. What are some of the main learnings the authors share about engaging in RPPs over a six-year period? How can these learnings inform the practice of future RPPs in both rural and urban contexts?
5. How can the insights from this chapter encourage other project teams to embrace the need for pivots in their RPPs? What steps can be taken to create an environment where making necessary adjustments is viewed as a positive and crucial part of collaboration?

NOTE

- 1 Although we knew this could impact the interview data due to the power differences between the district leaders and teachers, we believed this potential limitation was minimized by the strong relationships the district leaders have with the teachers (they work regularly with the teachers as digital learning coaches and tech leads) and the nature of the interview questions (describing and reflecting on their implementation). Additionally, this potential negative impact was counterbalanced with the potential positive impact of teachers being able to have their ideas heard directly. This practice was started in year five of our RPP once the research- and practice-side partners knew each other well and research-side partners had seen the relationships that the practice-side partners had with teachers, including the candor with which teachers would talk to the district leaders. Having worked together for an extended time, we, the research side, were confident that the benefits of having district leaders present at the interviews would outweigh the potential drawbacks.

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Theme 3: Centering Marginalized Voices and Community Engagement



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Educational Equity Moves at the Speed of Trust

A Research Practice Partnership to Support Black Students' Postsecondary Pathways

Esohe Osai, Shanyce L. Campbell, Jackie Spiezia, Angela Flango, and James Fogarty

Nationally, 74% of high school students desire to earn a college degree (Youth Truth, 2023). For students from low-income families, only 15% attain the degree they aspire to achieve (Cahalan et al., 2022). The gap between aspirations of a college degree and realization is due to several factors. For youth who are Black and from low-socioeconomic status communities, deeply entrenched systemic barriers limit postsecondary achievement opportunities. In high-poverty, racially segregated schools, youth experience disparities in educational preparation—a miseducation that obscures college pathways and career goals. For example, access to dual enrollment and other advanced course opportunities facilitates the transition to postsecondary education (Karp & Hughes, 2008). However, Black students have the least access to advanced course preparation, as compared to students from every other racial group (NCES, 2019). The lack of equity results from structures and policies that advantage certain families based on race and income.

This chapter highlights the Justice Scholars Institute (JSI), an equity-centered research practice partnership (RPP) where deep collaboration across schools, communities, and a university fosters the trust necessary to sustain the work of addressing deeply entrenched educational inequities. We tell the story of our origin and transformation into an RPP through collaboration with A+ Schools, a community-based advocacy organization. We then set the context for our partner schools within the local public school district. Next, we highlight how our collaboration centers work with teachers to address policies and practices that can support or inhibit post-secondary pathways for students. Notably, the chapter includes a teacher's testament on trust and its complexities within public

education. As a case, we highlight the JSI Teacher Collective as a space that engages teachers in participatory approaches to humanize research and invite the voices of our students. We propose that our position in relational engagement and centering of participatory approaches facilitates trust and allows our work to counteract bureaucratic barriers and institutionalized norms of mistrust. The chapter concludes with considerations on how this collaboration fits into the framework of principles of equity through embodying values that foster sustainable partnership in an effort to remove barriers to post-secondary pathways for Black and other educationally marginalized youth.

THE JUSTICE SCHOLARS INSTITUTE—AN EQUITY-CENTERED COLLEGE PREPARATORY EFFORT ADDRESSING INEQUITIES IN PITTSBURGH

The Pittsburgh Public Schools system is one of many unfortunate examples of how systemic inequities affect the livelihood of Black families and communities through persistent educational disenfranchisement. In 1992, a group of Black parents and activists, who called themselves the Advocates for African American Students in Pittsburgh Public Schools, filed a lawsuit against the school system to address perpetual failures to meet the educational needs of Black students in the school district. The plaintiffs highlighted “excessive suspensions and harsh discipline for Black students. They also pointed to the exclusion of Black students from special programs because of a large academic achievement gap” (Schneider, 2022, par. 4) as violating the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act. A series of conciliation agreements were put in place to address the concerns, including creating an Equity Advisory Panel for the district and an equity office. In the 30+ years since the lawsuit, the Pittsburgh Public Schools has yet to meet the terms laid out in the agreements. Despite the efforts of multiple players, the experiences of Black students in the school district are still defined by numerous inequities that ultimately hinder students’ educational prospects and postsecondary possibilities.

The Justice Scholars Institute is a research-practice partnership and post-secondary readiness initiative that challenges educational inequities and responds to Black Pittsburgh residents’ attempts to advocate for more equitable educational opportunities for Black students in the district. JSI resides in the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) School of Education and is tied to a bold *school-wide vision* that forefronts equity and justice. Centered around transforming post-secondary opportunities for Black and marginalized students in underserved communities in Pittsburgh, JSI partners with school, community, and university partners to build capacity and promote transformational change. Currently, JSI works with three Pittsburgh Public Schools that serve predominantly Black students. The entry point to this transformational change is enrolling high school students in underserved schools in dual-credit courses through Pitt’s College in High School

(CHS) program. CHS is a nationally accredited dual enrollment program that serves over 150 high schools in Pennsylvania. Connecting CHS to underserved schools counteracts intransigent barriers to advanced courses and invites engagement with students and their schools to create a culture that fosters and celebrates post-secondary success. A+ Schools, led by co-author James Fogarty, provides data and analytic insight that informs us on the state of our partner schools, Pittsburgh Public Schools district realities, and the broader Pittsburgh educational ecosystem.

Development and Growth of the Justice Scholars Institute

JSI was launched in 2016 when the lead author facilitated a partnership that brought the CHS program to Westinghouse Academy, a 6th- through 12th-grade public school located in the predominantly Black Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh. At the time, students voiced concerns about the lack of opportunities to earn college credits at their high school despite the prevalence of such opportunities for students in other district schools that served more privileged students. This spoke to a problem much larger than one school district. CHS had been around for over 30 years and served over 150 schools statewide, yet never existed in schools in low-income communities that primarily serve students of color. This reality is consistent with national trends demonstrating lower access to dual enrollment for schools that serve youth of color (Museus et al., 2007).

Though Westinghouse is less than 3 miles from Pitt, few students in the school experienced opportunities to engage with the university regarding academic and career pathways. Due to the referenced systemic barriers, successful college pathways were a rarity. For example, when the program started in 2016, data showed that 6% of 9th graders who entered Westinghouse had a college degree six years post-graduation (PennCAN, 2017). This was not due to students' incapability but rather to the reality of systemic, institutional, and community-related barriers that often complicate the post-secondary transition for Black youth and youth from lower socioeconomic status communities. JSI was developed to address the systemic and institutional barriers while also addressing the psychosocial potentialities of students through teaching skills that support deep learning, critical consciousness, and engagement.

In 2021, JSI expanded to partner with Pittsburgh Perry High School and Pittsburgh Millionaires. These two schools, located in the Perry North and Hill District neighborhoods, are also high schools that serve a majority Black student population. The expansion resulted from three simultaneous efforts, all initiated in 2020. First, leaders in the district reached out to JSI to consider expanding advanced course experiences to students in Pittsburgh Millionaires, where they had attempted to build an early college high school model. Second, the first and second authors received a competitive funding award from the University of Pittsburgh Office of the Chancellor. The award provided additional resources to scale

up JSI efforts and to strategically partner with A+ Schools, a community partner to support the intention to reach more students across different neighborhoods, namely Pittsburgh Perry. Last, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequities within our school district. The pandemic and co-occurring racial justice movement highlighted many realities related to systemic inequities and propelled advocacy efforts to respond to the education crisis for Black students in Pittsburgh. One of those advocacy efforts was Black Women 4 Better Education, which launched a campaign to elect school board candidates. The convergence of these activities created an environment that supported the growth of JSI from a school-university partnership in one school to a formal district partner with requisite agreements to support students in three underserved schools that serve mostly Black children. The momentum was influenced by increased coordination among community-based organizations and activists that sought to meet the needs of children, families, and communities all impacted by the increasingly fraught sociopolitical environment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our observations of the educational landscape for Black youth and data from our partner schools led us to a research question: How can a social justice-centered, post-secondary pathways partnership address educational inequities experienced by Black communities?

A+ Schools: Data-Connected and School-Engaged Partner for Educational Improvement

Pittsburgh is uniquely situated among urban school systems with a set of organizations, philanthropists, and universities who have all played a role in trying to improve outcomes for students in its public schools. The city is ranked fourth per capita in philanthropic giving in the United States¹ and supports an ecosystem of organizations that provide supports for families, students, and teachers across the region. Founded in 2004, A+ Schools provides families, policymakers, and foundations with independent analysis of school data. The measures of equity that they look at, developed in partnership with the former dean of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education, Alan Lesgold, provide the community not only with an understanding of student proficiency on state exams but also dig deeper into the opportunities and supports students have to facilitate educational successes.

Like many local education organizations, A+ Schools has, over the years, provided the community with a way to turn the data into action, advocating for policy changes like a Student Bill of Rights, led by their TeenBloc program, that created a student advisory board for the superintendent. Their policy advocacy has led to significant changes in teacher evaluation and support, AP course placement requirements, and school budget processes. However, data and advocacy alone do not lead to the kind of transformative practice changes needed to impact classroom experiences for children.

Starting in 2018, A+ Schools began working with a set of teachers, students, and community partners to reimagine Perry High School. As this process evolved, I (James Fogarty, A+ Schools executive director) reached out to the Justice Scholars Institute to see if replicating their success at Pittsburgh Westinghouse would be possible at Perry. As a result of the conversations related to Perry and the larger changes needed to improve high school education for children living in poverty, especially Black and Brown children, a research-practice partnership was formed. A+ Schools and JSI would work together, leveraging the insights A+ Schools had from the data and the on-the-ground knowledge of post-secondary transition processes through JSI's work to inform how to improve both organizations' efforts to give Pittsburgh's children the 21st-century education they deserve.

Setting the Context for Partner Schools²

The initial partner school, Westinghouse Academy, is a neighborhood school that also serves as the high school for the (adjacent) borough of Wilkinsburg. Like Pittsburgh Perry and Milliones, at Westinghouse, only some students elect to attend the school based on course offerings or career and technical education programs. Westinghouse serves 22% of students in the neighborhood boundaries served by the school, whereas Milliones and Perry serve 17% and 19%, respectively. In terms of size, Westinghouse is the largest school served by JSI, with 679 students. Perry served 335 and Milliones 329 students in the 2021–22 school year. Black students make up a significant percentage of the student population (Westinghouse 92.34%, Milliones 87.84%, Perry 77.61%), which is mostly economically disadvantaged—defined as receiving some form of public assistance based on income each month. Across the three schools, approximately 85% of students are economically disadvantaged. These three schools house a considerable proportion of the Black high school students in a district that is 53% Black.

At the school level, compared to other Pittsburgh Public Schools, Westinghouse and Milliones have a higher percentage of inexperienced teachers (23% Westinghouse, 31% Milliones, compared to 9% districtwide in 2020–21). Additionally, Westinghouse and Milliones receive less per-pupil spending than the district average per pupil (\$28,826.89), spending \$25,283.69 and \$25,542.40 per pupil. In contrast, a magnet school in the same district is a Blue-Ribbon school where the student population is 61% White students (in a district that is 33% White) and has a student population that is 3% economically disadvantaged. At this magnet school, one-third of teachers are National Board Certified. The comparisons between the JSI partner schools and the referenced magnet school demonstrate the reality of systemic barriers that embed inequalities and inequities in student learning experiences within the same school system.

Related to the postsecondary transition, graduation rates for Milliones and Westinghouse were much lower than national or state-adjusted cohort graduation

rates (Milliones 64% in 2021, Westinghouse 67% in 2021, versus 75% statewide for Black students). Eighty-two percent of Perry students graduate from high school. Based on data from the National Student Clearinghouse, students from these three schools are not likely to enroll in college or trade school immediately following graduation. In 2021, 27% of Westinghouse students, 19% of Perry students, and 10% of Milliones students enrolled in postsecondary education (2-year or 4-year programs) in the year immediately following graduation. The year prior to the launch of JSI, 19% of Westinghouse students enrolled in postsecondary education upon graduation.

Breadth and Depth of Our Partnership Approach

In 2023–2024, JSI enrolled 109 students across the three schools in college credit-bearing courses through the University of Pittsburgh. Housed in the School of Education, JSI utilizes the university’s resources to enhance academic preparation for students in the schools served. In addition to facilitating no-cost dual enrollment course opportunities at the schools, JSI provides out-of-school time experiences for youth, offers college preparatory workshops and community-engaged events that align with program aims, facilitates a community of practice for involved teachers, and engages in participatory research with students and teachers.

Intentionally addressing inequity requires going beyond merely adding advanced courses to school buildings where students did not previously have access. It also means creating the infrastructure that will allow students and teachers to thrive within a supportive learning ecosystem that centers justice in the context of an intentional post-secondary preparation effort. This kind of comprehensive work is only done in partnership. JSI partners broad and wide to promote this goal of enhanced equity for Black youth. The community partner assists us in distilling data that helps us focus on the needs and opportunities across the schools. The teachers and administrators are central to our efforts, as their partnership keeps us all moving in the same direction. As a vast institution, Pitt serves as a connector for any idea or initiative JSI hopes to bring to the schools. Our partnership includes numerous faculty and staff from the School of Education, School of Social Work, University Library System, and Learning Research & Development Center, all supporting the mission to enhance educational opportunities for young people in public schools. Partnering across school, university, and community spaces requires thoughtful attention to practices that facilitate sustainability and that forefront the necessary equity-centered approaches to address the needs of Pittsburgh’s Black community.

Since its inception, the Justice Scholars Institute has worked with Pitt’s nationally accredited CHS program to reduce barriers for Black students in our traditionally underserved public schools. For years, the Pittsburgh Public

Schools district sought to offer dual enrollment through local community colleges through an early college high school (ECHS) approach. Due to collective bargaining agreements and multiple additional barriers, both with the district and the community college, the ECHS effort did not gain traction. As a concurrent enrollment program, CHS allows accredited high school teachers to instruct college courses using syllabi and professional development opportunities provided through Pitt. With this approach, district-employed high school teachers are central to the JSI programmatic effort. While working within a system that has demonstrated an inability to serve Black students effectively, these teachers are also committed to redressing the inequities and providing high-quality learning experiences that can support students' post-secondary aspirations.

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY MOVES AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

As a research practice partnership in a city with a long history of miseducation for Black communities, I (Esohe Osai, JSI founder) think and act with consideration of how our efforts can address anti-blackness in the school system. As a Black woman-founded and -led initiative, JSI utilizes womanist principles to guide our collaboration, allowing us to position relational knowledge and humanization as central to our practice (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). I approach partnership with a focus on people, even as our efforts aim to address systemic educational challenges. The partnership ultimately happens at the level of people rather than at the level of institutions. JSI has less to do with the University of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Public Schools system and more to do with the teachers, community collaborators, district leaders, and university faculty and staff who are working in support of the students. Two fundamental approaches define our work. First, to counteract decades of disservice to children and families, JSI is built on a relational engagement approach that values every partner as equal in our collective struggle for a high-quality education for children and families in Black communities. Second, equity efforts require the voices of students, teachers, families, and community members and thus necessitate participatory research methods to facilitate change.

Relational Engagement

Humanizing engagements that center relationships must be guided by shared values that inform practice. In our work, guiding partnering principles include communication, reciprocal respect, inclusion, steadiness, and progress. These values are critical for establishing and maintaining trust in partnerships, and they guide us as JSI collaborates across schools, universities, and communities (Suarez-Balcasar et al., 2004). Trust is a critical yet fragile element in any relationship

(Tan & Tan, 2000), and it is central to healthy partnerships (Wolff & Maurana, 2001). A study on trust in community and institutional partnerships surfaced distinctions between trust at the individual and organizational levels (White-Cooper et al., 2009). According to the authors, barriers to trust are often organizational, while facilitators of trust are interpersonal. This reality resonates with how JSI has successfully operated between schools and a university within a landscape of educational malpractice. Long-standing distrust of the education system in Pittsburgh, along with a history of general distrust of universities within Black communities, would suggest that organizational trust would be lacking. However, the relationships between individuals across the boundaries of school, community, and university cause trust to be enduring and expansive as people engage in partnership with a shared emphasis on addressing inequities that negatively affect Black children and youth.

The importance and value of classroom teachers are central to JSI's partnership practice. Our effort is a co-designed, co-delivered, and co-validated (Vargas & Venezia, 2015) approach that would not exist without deep collaboration with classroom teachers. Specifically, the work developed and gained momentum after the involvement of an English teacher and a history teacher at Westinghouse Academy. Numerous weekly conversations over the program's initial years helped JSI take shape and find a groove in supporting students and working within the structures of the public school system. The conversations grew a trusting relationship between us and launched the work more rapidly than expected. Angela Flango, a teacher at Westinghouse Academy, shares a first-person narrative of how she navigates the tensions of being in an inequitable system while pushing back against systemic inequities as a key collaborator within the Justice Scholars Institute.

WHAT DOES TRUST LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE? A FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE

Within the secondary educational landscape, bureaucratic strongholds and conflicting priorities often make for challenging work environments at best and frustratingly ineffective systems and spaces at worst. As a teacher for over ten years, I have rarely met an educational professional who doesn't claim to do their job "for the kids." However, belief systems about students' academic potential and what one is willing to professionally commit to facilitate the fulfillment of this potential vary based on the individual. When I came to Pittsburgh Westinghouse, I knew I was entering an educational space to serve a primarily Black student population in an area of the city that experiences higher-than-average rates of poverty and violence. I also knew the school's reputation as one with low academic achievement, situated in a district that, on the other side of the spectrum, touted top-tiered schools not just within the city but the state. I was committed to equity as a teacher, doing what I could to facilitate the best educational experiences for the students I would be serving.

Soon after arriving at Westinghouse, I was introduced to Esohe Osai and the Justice Scholars Institute's partnership with Pitt. JSI provided a framework of support, dedication, and teamwork to work intentionally and strategically in unison to achieve the goal of supporting students. With a focus on equity and collaboration, we started to develop the program from the ground up, channeling enormous effort, an extensive time commitment, and an unwavering belief that our students can and would rise to meet the expectations. Collaboration with the partners at Pitt served to strengthen the work I was already committed to doing with my students.

The foundation of our partnership was built on trust developed through a simple but essential belief: our students are capable of success. In any school, priorities can vary from classroom to classroom, office to office. Our school was no different. The partnership we were building was based on the shared priority that students needed to have rigorous academic experiences in their high school classroom settings rooted in college-level courses to succeed in postsecondary education. Understanding that we shared this priority allowed the trust to build and withstand the challenges that ensued as the program developed. This trust fostered a partnership that was not just positive but productive in a way that is only possible when there is mutual respect among the team members. We were working to build a program to support our students specifically, to intentionally see and value them for who they were and what they could do, and to support our students beyond a single school year or classroom grade. This partnership was a manifestation of an investment in our kids as students, learners, and individuals who, too often, had been marginalized by the systems and society surrounding them. All participants in this partnership were on the same proverbial page, and because of this, it began to grow.

As a professional, I have experienced breakdowns in communication many times. Communication is critical to success in any professional setting, and the continuous open line of dialogue within our partnership is one of the key ingredients to success. Nevertheless, communication is only as good as the response it receives. There have been countless times over the last six years when I have voiced a need, concern, or frustration within the partnership and not necessarily expected a response, a conditioned attitude born of the bureaucratic constraints and overworked personnel of public education. However, within this partnership, those concerns were not only validated but actively addressed.

The cruciality of this communicative response to the teacher's needs cannot be overstated. So often, the challenges of the job leave the teacher part of me feeling like I am operating on an island, a silo of four walls filled with 30 teenagers depending on me to always be at my best. The work of a teacher is demanding, and it is only possible to do well with support. I am a better teacher to my students through the support from JSI, continuing to grow in my practice as my needs are validated, and my requests are addressed. Within a struggling school system, there is a tendency to play the blame game, pointing fingers as to who is at fault for the current circumstances. This dynamic has been completely absent from our partnership. In a profession where it can be so

difficult to ask for help, whether it is because the requests are ignored or because they are perceived as admissions of weakness, the JSI partnership has been a safe space where I can ask for help to grow as a teacher for the benefit of my students. Our partnership has offered and sustained that support through clear, consistent, and responsive communication, resulting in enduring trust.

What started as a team of three within one school has grown to three schools, over ten teachers, hundreds of college credits earned, and thousands of scholarship dollars received. However, the highlight of the collaboration and partnership has been the teamwork that has resulted in measurable student success and achievement. More students are entering college and continuing to work toward their degrees beyond the first or second semester. Students are earning more scholarships because of their academic work and skills developed through the program. Most importantly, students are graduating with more confidence and belief in themselves, the conviction that they can persevere through difficult tasks, and greater commitment to success and the pride that comes with achievement. This is because of the teamwork facilitated through the partnership. The partnership we have built is born of a shared commitment to providing an equitable academic experience to students to facilitate a successful postsecondary transition.

Built-in Equity Through Participatory Research

Partnerships between universities and school districts are understandably fragile due to the misappropriation of power. Academics often enter school partnerships as a “knowing class,” operating with a top-down approach, which creates mistrust among school personnel who often communicate the mismatch between theory and practice. The RPP between JSI and the school district cannot escape this theory versus practice debate. However, humanizing practices can lessen the tension.

As noted, I (Esohe Osai) began working closely with two teachers in our first partner school during the early years. As our efforts expanded, Shanyce L. Campbell and I developed the Teacher Collective (a.k.a. the Collective), which involves the CHS course instructors across the three partner schools. Formed in 2021, the Collective was co-created as an equity-focused space to develop a community of practice using transformative methods to address and support the educational and postsecondary preparation needs marginalized by the Pittsburgh educational system. The Collective involves an intergenerational and interdisciplinary group of educators, including the teachers across the three high schools JSI serves, Pitt faculty researchers and staff, and community members, including a retired teacher and a retired professor. While all teachers teaching CHS courses in our partner schools are invited to participate, it is a voluntary but compensated opportunity, with a commitment to attend monthly meetings and a summer convening.

To understand how the Collective co-designed a collaborative space in service of Black students, JSI draws on critical race design (CRD) (Khalil & Kier, 2017). CRD integrates design-based implementation research and critical race theory to attend to the students of color's "broader social contexts and address their systematic marginalization and socialization within their learning ecologies" (Khalil & Kier, 2017, p. 58). CRD principles include: (1) stakeholders must have frequent and transparent critical conversations to collaboratively identify inequities and possible competing interests; (2) to design for a just education, stakeholders must use a race-conscious approach to understanding systematic disenfranchisement; and (3) in iteratively designing and refining implementation, stakeholders of colors' personal narratives must be centered to "co-resist, co-construct, co-practice and co-refine" (Khalil & Kier, 2017, p. 59).

During the first year of the Collective, our group centered collaboration anchored in relationality, which counters the common transactionally oriented RPPs that reinforce hierarchical power dynamics and thwarts the goals of an equity-centric RPP. Co-developing sessions with educators allowed for meetings tailored to their needs. This also required the JSI team to be flexible and supportive of what the Collective needed, not our own program or research interests. The need for intentional collaboration was central to our engagement as a Collective. The collaboration included three forms: within the school with other CHS teachers working to improve students' educational experiences; across building collaboration with equity-minded teachers in other partner schools; and with university community co-conspirators, working for educational equity and transformation. Our gatherings served as a homeplace for educators where each attendee could just lay our burdens down, which was vital in developing meaningful, authentic relationships. Insights from the teachers' experiences are shared through open-ended survey questions collected during the school year.

According to one Collective member:

There is very rarely time to collaborate with teachers within our own building, let alone with teachers outside of our building. This space has provided dedicated time to share thoughts, concerns and ideas about challenges and situations that we experience.

Another mentioned:

When I'm able to hear the different perspectives of my colleagues both in and out of my building, it helps expand my thinking and understanding of social justice and equity. It also raises more questions and concerns that, while I might not have the answer to, I think are important questions to be asked and explored.

Intentional collaboration was also coupled with the notion of collective care. Care was expressed through the humanization of the space by centering joy through poetry, popular media, and mindfulness. The Collective meetings emphasized self-care and community care to mitigate the effects of teacher burnout due to the stresses of working in crisis spaces. Teachers' experiences of burnout were given space through listening and empathizing. In response to those expressions, sessions implemented self-care offerings that supported teachers in prioritizing their own needs despite the cacophony of crisis reflected in our schools, communities, and the broader society. Care was also reflected in the relationality that represented our interactions within the Collective. With RPPs, there is often a rush to get to the "doing of research" but not sitting with the idea that research begins within the self, individual, or collective.

The summer after our first year as the Collective, JSI held a summer gathering to reflect on our partnership in the past year and to plan for the upcoming school year. Given the trust, community, and brave space fostered in the first year, our group could focus our attention on research as a freedom dream for our students. In other words, our foundation of relational engagement facilitated the trust required to engage more critically about our practice and our students' experiences. Using a design-based approach, our research sought to understand barriers and facilitators in post-secondary transitions, particularly for Black students in our school district. Though students who do not identify as Black attend our partner schools, because of a critical lens, our research and practice pay attention to the ways anti-Blackness is built into the school system and the impacts this form of racism has on all students. As a research project, teachers interviewed graduates of our schools who were involved with JSI and were one year removed from high school graduation. Our design intentionally matched teachers and students representing different schools to avoid potential power dynamics from prior relationships. This layered participatory methodology supports teachers' knowledge of our schools and student voice in our engagement to enhance equity in post-secondary transitions.

PURSuing THE GOAL OF ENHANCED EQUITY FOR STUDENTS IN PITTSBURGH

Equity is a throughline in our work to support postsecondary preparation for Black youth in Pittsburgh. The context of the 1992 lawsuit against our local public school system and Pitt School of Education's mission statement create a shared language of equity that guides us as JSI seeks to improve educational experiences for Black Pittsburgh. Our effort was birthed out of observed inequities that revealed a disparity in access to advanced courses for students in our communities. Supporting post-secondary pathways and increasing opportunities to access and succeed in advanced courses represent the foundation on which JSI was built. As demonstrated in this chapter, our emphasis on supporting teachers through

a relational engagement approach to partnership has allowed us to navigate systemic challenges that often emerge when institutions attempt to partner at an organizational level instead of at the level of individuals. Equitable relationships exist, as JSI centers the value of reciprocity as faculty and staff at the university engage with school-based personnel and community partners. Equity in method is represented through the centering of participatory approaches to research and through partnership with a community-based organization that uses data to pursue systems improvements in our city-wide educational structures. The work of JSI is done with an eye toward equity, since inequity for Black students is the basis for our existence as a program.

The collaboration built through the Justice Scholars Institute has intentionally sought to challenge and disrupt popular notions of what is possible for Black children in our most underserved and marginalized schools and communities. It is an effort to dream, hearing the dreams of our youth, and providing them pathways to make those dreams a reality despite the systemic barriers, and with the hopes that they will eventually become those who will help us upend the systemic barriers. Challenging that system takes a herculean effort that cannot be sustained by any individual stakeholder or institution. The systemic inequities must be addressed with intentional efforts that are collaborative and built by trust.

Our equity-centered research-practice partnership is intentional in many ways—one of them being intentionally relational in our practice to maintain trust, which is essential for sustaining this necessary and complicated work. Thus, our approach works closely with collaborators, especially the teachers who are privileged to be with our students daily. Even though JSI is a research-practice partnership, research agendas are secondary to a truly participatory approach as we seek to address complex problems. Our work has scratched the surface of what can happen when students are given access and opportunities related to resources that can support their postsecondary transition. Deepening our efforts will require deepening relationships as we design learning experiences that allow students to realize their educational aspirations.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter highlighted the necessary steps to establishing the trust required to facilitate an effective research-practice partnership. In particular, it touched on the *equitable RPP relationships* component of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. What were some of the ways university-based partners built trust and community with the teachers in this RPP and what lessons can be learned from these successes?
2. How did the critical race design methodology influence the directions and outcomes of the RPP?

3. How might data provided from A+ Schools, the non-profit collaborator, influence the design and approach of this RPP?
4. How does the teacher's narrative of her experience in the partnership inform our understanding of the role of trust in educational change?
5. What does this case study reveal about how the theoretical orientations (e.g., womanist and critical race theories) guiding the RPP project can help support equity and justice?

NOTES

- 1 Grantmakers of Western PA. <https://gwpa.org/sites/default/files/resources/Giving%20in%20Pittsburgh-How%20Much%20Stays%20Local.pdf>.
- 2 School-level data provided by A+ Schools, which is a leader in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of critical educational data, offering insights and research stemming from system improvement efforts in schools.

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Expanding Conceptions of Equity from Network Practice to the Research Process

Kemi Anike Oyewole and Eve Arbogast

Long before anti-Black racism made national news after the murder of George Floyd, equity was on the agenda in the Main Unified School District (USD) instructional coaching network.¹ The Main USD instructional coaching network is composed of 45 school-based teachers on special assignment. The excerpt of the instructional coach job description affirmed at each monthly network meeting outlines an urgent charge to attain dramatic gains in student learning while eliminating disparities in student opportunities and outcomes. Beyond equity being on the agenda, it is the Main USD coaching network agenda.

The explicit equity focus of the network is a product of the district context. Main USD is an urban, public school district that serves around 50,000 students in more than 100 schools. Though the plurality of Main USD students are Asian, Latinx students are the district's second largest student racial demographic. Of the district's student body, 30% are classified as English learners, 10% have individual education plans (IEPs), and 55% receive free or reduced price lunch. As is the norm across the United States, Main USD teachers are mostly White and women. Main USD's mission and justification for district programs includes articulated commitments to equity across student race, disability, socioeconomic status, and home language. The district's equity commitments align with the priorities of the politically progressive city where Main USD is based. The city's openness to tapping academic expertise supports Main USD in cultivating partnerships with universities and other research institutions.

This chapter chronicles a study on instructional coach learning conducted through a research-practice partnership (RPP) between Main USD and a research university from 2019–2023. The chapter first outlines the operation of the Main USD coaching network, second narrates the project's initiation through the RPP, third describes the process of prioritizing equity while using less-collaborative methods, and then recounts the collaborative engagement of a coach design

team. The chapter concludes with recommendations. Flawed, elitist notions of practitioner ignorance can lead university research partners to presume that they are best equipped to define equity in partnerships. The rich equity practice in the Main USD coaching network refutes this notion by showing how prioritizing practice-side partners' existing conceptions of equity can level power relations in RPPs (Farrell et al., 2021).

MAIN UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING NETWORK

Instructional coaching is an evidence-based strategy for school change (Kraft et al., 2018). Beyond uniformly improving student outcomes, there has been attention to the value of coaching for addressing educational disparities—one of the most pressing issues of our time (Aguilar, 2020). However, coaches' ability to advance educational equity is reliant on their willingness to do the deep work of shifting their behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being. In addition to changes to their individual practice, equity coaches must pursue systems transformation. Despite this expansive charge, coaches hired for their teaching expertise have little training on how to motivate their peers to shift their practice toward equity (Woulfin, 2020). Main USD sought to meet this need by creating a professional learning network so the district's instructional coaches could refine their practice by learning from central office leaders and each other.

The Main USD central office funds coaches for schools that have high concentrations of minoritized students, high staff turnover, high rates of segregation, or low standardized-test scores. In particular, the coaches are charged with improving outcomes for their focal student groups: African American students, multilingual learners, and students with IEPs. Main USD coaches are expected to achieve this goal by working with principals and school leadership teams to build capacity. Coaches are directed to advance school transformation by leading professional development, offering instructional coaching, initiating discussions on equity, and facilitating team meetings (e.g., grade levels, departments, instructional leadership teams). Coaches hired in Main USD are required to have at least five years of teaching experience, a valid teaching license, and a commitment to equity. Even though some coaches have been in the network for more than ten years, one-third of coaches leave the Main USD network each year to return to the classroom, enter school administration, or work outside of the district.

The coaches are hired and networked by a central office administrator who serves as the coaching network director (CND). The CND hosts half-day network meetings as coach professional development. The meetings entail whole-group presentations on Main USD's curricular priorities, small-group conversations on leading school change, and paired roleplay to practice managing challenging

scenarios. The network's equity focus is reflected in whole-group presentations and one-on-one support from the CND. Individually, coaches articulate and revisit professional goals that are aligned to growing in antiracist praxis. Further, in the 2020–2021 academic year, coaches participated in racial affinity spaces to consider ways their responses to equity challenges are shaped by their individual identities.

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice are often-used terms in education but can be enacted in vastly different ways (Turner, 2020). The CND vocalizes the network's conception of equity by reading a series of statements at each meeting. These statements include the Main USD mission statement on educating *all* of its students; a portion of coaches' job description that emphasizes their responsibility to advance equity; the Main USD definition of anti-racism; and an accounting of those affected communities not in the room for the meeting, notably the students intended to be at the center of coaches' work. These regularly revisited principles standardize language around the purpose of the meetings, the reality that there are educational equity gaps to address, and the benefits of focusing coach efforts on historically underserved student groups.

Additionally, approaches to equity are normed through shared texts. Each year, the CND identifies an equity-oriented book to discuss in network meetings. Then the district provides it to all of the coaches. As a result, the framings presented in texts like *Coaching for Equity* (Aguilar, 2020) and *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (Hammond, 2014) surface in network discussions. Additionally, the CND begins meetings with quotes from progressive Black intellectuals (e.g., Ibram Kendi, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou) to initiate conversations about the need for and ways to advance anti-racism. The CND is transparent in articulating the facilitation moves made to induce coach participation and develop their equity practice. The CND introduces these authors to center the voices of people of color as coaches endeavor to address disparate outcomes by race and other factors.

ESTABLISHING A PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

At the start of the instructional coach project in 2019, the sponsoring RPP was ten years old. The partnership had grown to simultaneously support more than a dozen research projects and ongoing collaborations (e.g., longitudinal data collection, internship placements). These collaborative endeavors are managed through an RPP director hired by a nonprofit not affiliated with Main USD or the university. A key function of the RPP directorship involves brokering connections between Main USD central office administrators and university researchers. After identifying shared interests or needs, the RPP director facilitates an initial meeting to establish a relationship and surface the ends desired by the practice- and research-side partners (Wentworth et al., 2021). The RPP director's work

as a boundary spanner benefits from their experience in both types of organizations as a K12 public school teacher and as a doctoral-level researcher.

Beyond these joint meetings, the RPP director introduces university partners to the key components of RPPs outlined by Farrell et al. (2021), placing the onus on university partners to be aware of their positional privilege and the challenges district administrators face when balancing urgent district needs with long-term research projects (Tanksley & Estrada, 2022). The RPP director's commitment to placing training responsibilities on university researchers seeks to advance one of the RPP's equity goals: to level partnership power dynamics by upending the assumption that practice-side partners need to change their approach to accommodate their research-side peers (The Collaborative Education Research Collective, 2023). The RPP director also uses their position to negotiate interpersonal and institutional conflicts in partnership projects as they arise. Beyond supporting individual projects, the RPP director organizes webinars featuring partnership projects and large meetings uniting Main USD central office staff with university researchers. These activities are intended to strengthen district-university relationships, both individual and institutional.

The RPP director initiated this project's partnership by connecting the CND to a university researcher.² At the start of the project, the CND had been in the role for three years. Prior to this role, the CND held other instructional leadership roles, with their entire K-12 career in Main USD. The CND's administrative leadership was shaped by early-career experiences teaching afterschool programming and elementary school. The researcher leading the project was a PhD student with previous experience as a K-12 educator and mixed methods research. Both the CND and researcher vocalized commitments to educational equity that shaped their future collaboration.

After separately building relationships with the CND and researcher, the RPP director scheduled an orienting meeting. The RPP director elicited the goals of both parties. The CND was interested in understanding ways coaching network meetings and relationships might stimulate the transformation of coaches' work in schools, the spread of best practices, and the acceleration of learning for students underserved by the district. On the other hand, the researcher was most compelled by the opportunity to use social network analysis to explore the interactions of instructional coaches with other educators at their school sites. The RPP director used their district and research experience to offer a sketch of a research project that could combine both interests and equitably achieve both individuals' goals. The RPP director suggested that the research project use multiple methods, including social network analysis, to study the Main USD coaching network as a boundary object that serves as a link between the directives of the Main USD central office and the teachers enacting this policy (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). The RPP director also suggested that after exploring the network itself, there could be opportunities to consider the downstream impacts

of coaches at their school sites. The trust the RPP director had built with both partners made the CND and researcher receptive to the proposed plan.

INFUSING EQUITY INTO THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Building on the initial meeting with the RPP director, the CND and researcher committed to understanding the operation of the Main USD coaching network through observations of network meetings, interviews with coaches, and coach survey data. The CND and researcher worked together to identify observation focuses, refine an interview protocol, and develop a survey that could provide data on Main USD priorities while using validated survey measures.

Beginning in the 2019–2020 academic year, the researcher conducted participant observations at coaching network meetings. These observations were done with an eye toward both immediate network improvement and long-term opportunities for research analysis. The partners attempted to promote immediate network improvement through twice-monthly research-progress meetings. These meetings involved boundary practices designed to promote equity between the CND and researcher (Farrell et al., 2022). They used a jointly maintained agenda in hopes that neither partners' priorities took precedence. Additionally, they alternated the location of their in-person meetings from the Main USD central office to university spaces to coffee shops at the midpoint of their workplaces. They also sought equity in their project communication by using multiple tools and working to accommodate the rhythms of each others' schedules (e.g., final exams, budget requests, upcoming interviews).

As an example of the product of the close collaboration of the CND and researcher, the researcher heard a small group conversation between high school coaches voicing their dissatisfaction with email updates that centered elementary schools. After the researcher brought these concerns to the CND, the CND added more information on high schools to subsequent email updates. Given the CND felt unable to connect with all 45 coaches at meetings, the CND used the researcher as a tool for understanding coach needs.

Throughout the study period, the researcher attempted to cultivate trust and build rapport with coaches. A byproduct of these relationship-building practices was coaches' increasing willingness to converse with and in front of the researcher, expanding the volume and quality of data. One tool used to foster researcher-coach connections was understanding their equity practice. The researcher reviewed the texts the coaching network studied in previous years to better understand coaches' perspectives and consider parallels with academic scholarship. This shared language of equity equipped the researcher to reference familiar terms and authors when speaking with coaches. The researcher also sought to build relationships by transparently communicating about the research

process and connecting on topics beyond the meeting content, ranging from family to popular culture.

Then these relationships changed as the world confronted the COVID-19 pandemic. Main USD coaching network meetings shifted to a video-conferencing platform. This change created an increased desire for the CND to understand the experiences at virtual network meetings. So, at the conclusion of the 2019–2020 academic year, the researcher presented some preliminary analysis. Though the analysis was not comprehensive enough for a traditional academic piece, completing a summary of the data within a week of the school year's end allowed the CND to use the information for end-of-year reflection and program planning. This was one of many occasions where there was tension between quickly turning around analysis for Main USD and the slower work of academic writing. The researcher aimed to prioritize the urgent needs of the school district as an immediate opportunity to promote local educational equity. On the practice side, the CND supported the researcher's goals of collecting data for future academic publications. However, this approach resulted in the researcher making slower than desired progress with their publishing goals.

In the 2020–2021 academic year, the research partnership continued in a virtual setting. In the summer of 2021, the researcher completed a ten-page summary that included raw data from the longitudinal survey, a social network visualization, and an array of recommendations for the school district. The CND and researcher submitted the report to the Main USD research office. Subsequently, the RPP director supported the CND and researcher in consolidating the project learnings into a two-page research brief.

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT TO CENTER THOSE CLOSEST TO THE ISSUES

At the start of the 2021–2022 academic year, the research project reached the end outlined in the initial proposal. However, the CND and researcher felt they had not yet engaged members of the coaching network in the research process. They also wanted to act on their finding that, though women of color coaches were the most sought for advice in the network, their expertise was not similarly appreciated in schools. So the CND and researcher recruited nine experienced Main USD coaches, disproportionately women of color, to form a member-checking focus group. The group was designed to shed light on whether the themes and recommendations presented to the Main USD research office aligned with coaches' experiences (Birt et al., 2016). The group's composition sought to center the experiences of populations historically underrepresented in research processes. In order to support the equitable inclusion of collaborators, the university compensated participating coaches for their time during meetings and for their review of research reports between meetings. During member checking

meetings, the coaches were encouraged to ask questions and suggest future directions. Though coaches affirmed the results and suggested next steps, even after prompting, they did not mention any points of disagreement.

After the focus group, these coaches were interested in joining a design team that would use preliminary research findings to improve their network. To support this process, the researcher introduced design-based implementation research (DBIR). The principles of DBIR are

A focus on persistent problems of practice from multiple stakeholders' perspectives; a commitment to iterative, collaborative design; a concern with developing theory related to both classroom learning and implementation through systematic inquiry; and a concern with developing capacity for sustaining change in systems.

(Penuel et al., 2011, p. 332)

These aims aligned with the CND and researcher's interest in cultivating equity in the research process and creating sustainable change in the coaching network. The researcher introduced the model by drawing parallels between DBIR and the coaches' experience using Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles in coaching network meetings.

In the fall of 2021, Main USD had returned to in-person schooling but had been transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been widely documented educational impacts of the pandemic, school closures, and virtual schooling (Agostinelli et al., 2022; Gayatri & Irawaty, 2022). Main USD experienced many of them: difficulty finding teacher substitutes, increased socioemotional issues, regressed reading and mathematics skills, and communities strained by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. These factors made it challenging for design team coaches and the CND to devote time to research. At one point, Main USD central office administrators, including the CND, had to put aside their regular work to substitute in classrooms. Along these lines, the departure of the district superintendent and many other executive leaders led to ebbing time and support for research partnerships. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with national political contention that also surfaced in Main USD. Though Main USD's city is broadly progressive, there were fierce debates on school reopening, teacher working conditions, school naming, and the suitability of specific school board members. Though the CND avoided taking a stance on local political issues, coaches discussed them at coaching network meetings. The local and national political climate led coaches to express the urgency of discussions and actions to promote equity. Given the many constraints of this context, the design team coaches narrowed their focus from three change ideas to one: fostering within-network relationships by developing a peer coaching program.

Prior to each design team meeting, the CND and researcher met to determine what information or activity might advance the design process in the next session. The researcher identified existing models coaches could use as a starting point for their design. Then, at the start of meetings, the researcher used non-academic language to present these models. In the latter half of meetings, the design team used the models to identify next steps for the peer coaching program. After the meeting, the researcher would synthesize the meeting's content through tasks like combining designs into a single document, moving content from a shared document to a survey form, and sending an email summarizing the design team's progress. The CND attended design team meetings but attempted to promote equitable relationships by stepping back and speaking only to answer questions when prompted. By the end of the 2021–2022 academic year, the design team had outlined the mission of the peer coaching program, determined the form of the program, created a survey to match pairs, matched pairs from the priorities outlined in the survey, and used data to consider program improvements after the three-month peer coaching pilot.

Design team members were interested in going beyond the peer coaching pilot in the 2022–2023 academic year. The team used data to introduce modifications to the peer coaching program. These included offering a menu of ways to engage with one's peer coach, addressing absences at network meetings by combining two coaching pairs to form "pods," and offering time in network meetings to schedule future peer coaching check-ins. It was hard to get the consistent attendance of design team members at meetings. This was a result of conflicts with school programs, family needs, and personal appointments. Despite these challenges, the CND viewed the design team as a success. The CND mentioned plans to continue bringing network problems to design team members for coached solutions.

Beginning in the 2022–2023 academic year, the researcher aimed to expand the scope of the collaboration by moving from shared research inquiry and design to shared research dissemination (Sjölund et al., 2022). To this end, design team members presented with the CND and researcher at Main USD coaching network meetings, a Main USD-university research partnership meeting, a national conference on community-engaged research, and an international conference on educational research. Additionally, the researcher has worked with the CND and a design team member to write pieces for academic and practitioner publications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support Research-Practice Partnership Brokers

The Main USD instructional coaching project was initiated by a RPP director whose personal commitment to justice led to a project design that equitably met

the needs of both partners. Training brokers who can work between practice and research can support more projects that meet the needs of both spheres in service of educational equity. However, brokering comes with significant power (Kislov et al., 2017). A partnership broker less committed to equitable relations or outcomes could advance a project that is deficit oriented or prioritizes a specific partners' needs. Future research should explore the role of research offices and brokers in moving RPP project topics toward—or away from—equity.

Explore Beyond the Easily Quantified

The CND and researcher went beyond narrowly focusing on school-level outcomes (e.g., standardized test scores, attendance, suspension rates) impacted by teacher practice to understand a relational meeting space where educators *developed* their conceptions of pedagogy, conflict resolution, and leadership. Their approach to the research topic attempted to center the humanity of Main USD coaches. There is value in focusing on fluid processes of emergence rather than static products. This feminist approach elevates equity and justice (Ferguson, 2017).

Plan to Use Data for Justice

The researcher strove to promote equity in Main USD coaching network practice by offering the CND another source of feedback. However, minoritized communities often feel that their concerns are gathered as a symbol of engagement but seldom addressed (Chicago Beyond, 2019). This warranted skepticism points to the need for equitable RPP projects to not engage participants in data collection without a commitment to *justice-oriented action*. The action might include changing individual practice, advocating within an organization, or informing discussions taking place in the field. The potential scope of action should be clearly articulated to potential research participants. Then there should be follow-up with research participants for accountability and trust-building. There is danger in making lofty promises for system transformation that require buy-in beyond project leaders' loci of control. Honest communication about an RPP project's most ambitious goals, and most probable outcomes, increases the agency of prospective research participants.

Start Tomorrow's Research With Today's Practice

Especially in urban settings, there are many practitioners like Main USD coaches who already are thinking deeply and working tirelessly to advance equity. The Main USD network case reminds us that rather than colonizing their practice partners' language by prioritizing inaccessible academic terms, researchers can build from existing practice. In fact, many insights on practitioner approaches will come from books not necessarily written by academics (Behrstock-Sherratt et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, researchers can put practitioner- and research-oriented texts in conversation as an equity-promoting and research-enhancing practice.

Validate Findings by Broadening Engagement

The incorporation of Main USD coaches into the member checking process and the evaluation of emergent findings suggests new opportunities to transform notions of validity in RPPs. This involved purposefully welcoming coaches from groups historically underrepresented into these participatory processes. However, even after being invited to push back on findings in the member checking focus group, participants did not offer critical feedback. It begs the questions, “Are there opportunities for partners to speak up if the research process is going in damaging or unfruitful directions? Is there enough trust and shared authority for research and practice partners to voice unpopular opinions? How should researchers ensure their findings accurately reflect partner experiences? Does the engagement of supervisors dampen the potential of collaborative efforts?” Thoughtfully answering these and other questions will shape our conception of equity in collaborative research methods.

Expand the Research Toolkit

The Main USD case shows the value of using multiple research methods, especially collaborative approaches. They used observations, interviews, surveys, a focus group, and a design team. Each of these methods led to findings that informed Main USD and raised relevant research questions. Collaborative approaches promote RPPs’ goal of using research to build capacity and address problems of practice from multiple perspectives (Tseng, Easton, et al., 2017). Further, DBIR’s focus on joint work and results for research and practice more evenly distributes authority in research processes (Tseng, Fleischman, et al., 2017). However, the frequent absences of design team members show the reality that collaborative projects will be constrained by the broader educational and social context.

CONCLUSION

When reflecting on their collaboration, the CND and researcher emphasized the ways equity shaped their relationship and project.

Foremost, we honored each others’ priorities and capacities during turbulent times. Our partnership has spanned a global pandemic, heightened attention to anti-Black racism, environmental catastrophe, economic precarity, political violence, and personal challenges (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Despite these obstacles, our partnership placed our humanity at its core. Our hope is that this commitment to equity emanated out to other research participants as well.

The CND and researcher endeavored to transform traditional research relations through close partnership and centering the people closest to the issues (Martin, 2022). The project outlined in this chapter aimed to broaden the definition of a researcher. However, this engagement required significant time and resources. The necessity of transforming research at each stage suggests the need for research and practice organizations to make concrete investments in more collaborative research futures.

Notions of progressive, intellectually free researchers might suggest that universities are the primary source of innovation on equity. Yet the Main USD coaching network project and traditions of activist praxis remind us that practice partners often lead the way in advancing justice (Kelley, 2002). Participants in RPPs should honor the equity work taking place in educational settings before trying to build upon it (Oyewole et al., 2023). As articulated by Bettina Love, a favorite author of Main USD coaches, “Pedagogy should work in tandem with students’ own knowledge of their community and grassroots organizations to push forward new ideas for social change” (2019, p. 19). Just as educators are called to celebrate the wisdom of students, research-practice partnerships should honor the wisdom of educational practice.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter explored how equitable relationships within the partnership helped an RPP effectively respond to the needs of practitioner partners. In particular, it touched on the *equity in topic* and *equity in methods* components of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. What structures and processes did the RPP use to ensure equitable relationships/status and shared equity language across the researchers and practitioners?
2. What specific strategies did the RPP director use in their role as a broker between the researchers and practitioners?
3. What spontaneous support was the researcher able to provide to the practitioner (CND) by virtue of the researcher’s presence at coaching network meetings?
4. How did the researcher and practitioner (CND) each make compromises to support the goals of the other?
5. How did the team respond to the social and political contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. What does this case study reveal about how the personal commitments and theoretical orientations of the researchers, practitioners, and brokers can help support equity and justice?

NOTES

- 1 Main USD is a pseudonym.
- 2 Though “researcher” is used to refer to the university researcher for the duration of the piece, this shorthand is not intended to diminish the role of the coaching network director as a co-inquirer and practitioner-researcher.

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Engaging Historically Marginalized Students and Families in School Improvement Processes

Insights From a University-District-Nonprofit RPP

Ariel Tichnor-Wagner, Elizabeth A. Barcay, Rohan Arcot, Hardin Coleman, and Alia Verner

One way that research-practice partnerships (RPPs) center equity is in the structures and processes through which researchers, practitioners, and school community members engage with one another (Farrell et al., 2023; Vetter et al., 2022). Farrell and colleagues (2023) identify these as (1) *coordination* between partners, wherein researchers and “high level” practitioners maintain traditional divisions of labor; (2) *collaboration* and joint decision-making, wherein practitioners also include teachers and school leaders and there are more opportunities for practitioners to be involved in researcher roles; and (3) *transformation* of research, whereby there is fluidity in roles between researchers and practitioners, and collaboration additionally involves students and families. With an increasing call in the field for RPPs to elevate students, families, and community members most directly impacted by educational inequities as collaborators in research (e.g., Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Jabbar & Childs, 2022), there is also a need to learn how RPPs can operationalize this transformation logic.

The Networked Improvement Community for Equitable Literacy (NIC) is one such RPP that has centered a transformation logic into its goals and structure. This partnership between a large urban school district, education non-profit, and university researchers is designed around an equity-focused networked improvement community (NIC) model. NICs bring the expertise of practitioners and researchers together to address practitioner-identified problems of practice using improvement science principles (Cohen-Vogel

et al., 2015; Penuel et al., 2018).¹ Though Bryk (2020) states that “intentionally formed networks draw together diverse sources of expertise from practitioner, school leaders, researchers, designers, technologists, and depending on the problem, often families and students as well” (p. 12), little research on NICs has documented how exactly students and families—particularly those from historically marginalized communities—have been involved. The need to understand how NICs can engage historically marginalized students and families is pertinent given that racially and linguistically diverse students and families have faced historical and systemic barriers along with outright racism and discrimination that have barred meaningful engagement in and the school community, and in school decision-making (e.g., Daneshzadeh & Sirrakos, 2018; Leddy, 2018; Rhodes, 2007; Shillingford et al., 2020; Yull et al., 2014).

As researchers and non-profit partners co-facilitating the NIC for Equitable Literacy, we share how this equity-focused NIC focused on meaningful student and family engagement in the school improvement process, the ways that schools in the NIC have implemented this focus, and the challenges and tensions that they experienced in forging equitable relationships with student and family partners. We conclude with key questions for how RPPs can plan to equitably engage students and families from historically marginalized backgrounds.

THE NIC FOR EQUITABLE LITERACY MODEL: CENTERING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES IN RPPs

The NIC for Equitable Literacy model developed out of an RPP between (1) an education nonprofit that provides grants to schools and youth-focused community organizations within the city, (2) the public school district’s opportunity gaps office, and (3) university researchers, all in the same large, ethnically diverse city in the northeast. Prior to the RPP’s launch, the nonprofit redeveloped a grant program to focus explicitly on advancing racial equity in the school district by distributing \$10,000 grants to select schools who apply. To ground the grant program in inclusive community input that aligned to district, school, and family priorities, the nonprofit engaged in focus groups in 2020 and 2021 with those most familiar with, involved in, and impacted by racial inequities. The focus groups asked about approaches and strategies for identifying and addressing root causes of racial inequities within the school system. These focus groups with students, educators, families, nonprofits, businesses, school leaders, higher education institutions, and district leaders led to the identification of a university research group and district leaders similarly focused on advancing racial equity using continuous improvement processes. In 2021, these three entities partnered together to form an RPP with the shared goal of reducing racial inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes for the city’s youth using an equity-focused NIC approach.

The local nonprofit, university researchers, and district administrators formed the governance team that manages the NIC. Governance responsibilities include recruiting schools and community organizations to join, planning for and facilitating convenings, providing technical support between convenings, aligning the NIC with district priorities, and conducting research and evaluation. NIC members include a cohort of school-based teams, who develop and implement site-based racial equity initiatives using improvement science methods. The explicit inclusion of students and families in school-based equity teams alongside school leaders and staff is an integral component of the NIC design and is a unique feature as compared to NICs in K-12 education currently documented in the literature that focus on collaboration between researchers and school and district practitioners (e.g., Bryk, 2020; Cannata et al., 2017). The NIC's theory of action posits that if school community members most directly impacted by systemic racial inequities are authentically engaged in school improvement work and decision-making processes, then schools will identify the true causes of the inequities and will develop aligned solutions to effectively dismantle those inequities.

As such, the RPP adapted the four characteristics of the NIC outlined by Bryk and colleagues (2015) to focus explicitly on racial inequities and to include authentic engagement of students and families. These equity-focused NIC characteristics that the RPP is grounded in include (equity additions emphasized in italics) that the NIC: (1) is focused on a well-specified aim *that directly addresses a context-specific racial inequity*; (2) is guided by a deep understanding of the problem and the system that produced it *through intensive root cause analyses focused on street data centering the voices of historically marginalized students and families*;² (3) uses improvement science methods to develop, test, and refine innovative *practice in conjunction with students, parents, and community stakeholders*; and (4) accelerates learning about tested practices within and beyond the network *in nonhierarchical ways*.

This chapter focuses on the RPP's most recent cohort of five district schools initiated in the 2023–2024 school year: the NIC for Equitable Literacy. The NIC for Equitable Literacy embeds both the equity topic of equitable literacy³ and equitable relationships with students and families of color, highlighted in its aims to (1) develop and implement school-based equitable literacy practices/policies using an improvement science approach that emphasizes shared decision-making with students and families of color and (2) reduce literacy inequities that school staff and students and families of color identify.

The cohort includes an early childhood elementary school, an elementary school, a traditional comprehensive high school, and two alternative high schools (see Table 10.1 for school demographic information). These schools were selected to participate through an application process in the fall involving a

Table 10.1 Participating school demographic data

School	Grades	Principal years of experience	Total student population 2023–2024	Student class, language, and race distribution (%)				
				Low income	First language not English	African American/ Black	Hispanic/ Latino	White
Bright Futures School	PK–1	11+	100–300	70–80	50–60	40–50	40–50	0–10
Courtyard Elementary	PK–6	0–3	200–400	50–60	20–30	20–30	30–40	30–40
Pathways High	7–12	0–3	700–900	80–90	60–70	20–30	60–70	0–10
Garden Academy	11–12	7–10	100–300	80–90	80–90	30–40	50–60	0–10
The Casa School	9–12	7–10	100–300	80–90	40–50	30–40	50–60	0–10

Note. Demographics presented in a range for confidentiality.

Zoom interview during which NIC governance asked for evidence that advancing racial equity and equitable literacy was a priority and questions about their capacity, ability, and eagerness to meaningfully involve students and families. All school teams demonstrated a commitment to engaging students and families in the NICEL while differing on the extent to which each school had pre-existing practices or school cultures of engaging students and historically marginalized families. For each selected school, team members also varied in number and composition, as did the focus of their equitable literacy problem of practice (see Table 10.2).

The multi-year set of activities that schools engage in as part of the NIC further embed equity principles throughout. These activities include (1) identifying a racial equity problem of practice the community is experiencing; (2) developing a deep understanding of the problem by prioritizing learning from the lived experiences of students and families as part of a root cause analysis; (3) working with school community members to identify change ideas that address the root causes of the inequity; and (4) testing change ideas, assessing their impact, and

Table 10.2 School NIC team composition and equity focus

<i>School</i>	<i>NIC composition</i>	<i>Problem of practice focus</i>
Bright Futures School	Principal Community Hub School Coordinator Family Liaison Reading Specialist Instructional Coach Two Teachers	Increasing Reading Proficiency Rate
Courtyard Elementary	Principal Two Instructional Coaches Parent	Family Engagement; Collaborative Development of Literacy Practices
Pathways High	Principal Family Liaison Business Manager	Learning Alignment with Student Interests, Experience
Garden Academy	Principal Registrar Family Liaison Partnerships Coordinator	Incorporate Student and Family Voices in Instructional Focus Areas
The Casa School	Principal Community Field Coordinator Secretary Six Teachers	Increasing Attendance Rate

deciding as a community to adopt and implement practices and strategies that work to advance racial equity *and/or* to adapt and abandon practices and policies that perpetuate racial inequities. Table 10.3 provides an overview of RPP activities that the schools participated in during the first year, which covered the previous first three steps and align with this book’s RPP Equity Framework principles of equity in topic, equity in method, and equity in project goals.

Across these activities, NIC governance introduced and continuously emphasized shared equity language around authentic student and family engagement. “Shared decision-making with students and families at every step of the process” was introduced to school-based teams during the NIC’s very first meeting, and emphasized at every convening thereafter by nonprofit staff, university researchers, and district administrators as new equity and improvement science concepts were introduced. For example, the district opportunity office partners presented district definitions, evidence-based practices, and policies for meaningful student

Table 10.3 NIC for equitable literacy convening activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Focus</i>
Orientation	Nov '23	Virtual	Overview of cohort goals, activities, and NIC process.
Convening #1	Dec '23	In-person	<i>Equity in Topic:</i> Sharing problems of practice.
Convening #2	Jan '24	Virtual	<i>Equity in Method:</i> Overview of root cause analysis (RCA) process and street data.
Winter One-on-One	Jan '24	Virtual	<i>Equity in Method:</i> Developing action plan for running RCA and collecting street data; mapping out alignment with other areas of work/priorities.
Convening #3	Feb '24	Virtual	<i>Equity in Project Goals:</i> Sharing findings from RCA; drafting an aim statement.
Convening #4	March '24	Virtual	<i>Equity in Project Goals:</i> Further developing aim statement; overview of change idea development and PDSA cycles.
Spring One-on-One	April '24	Virtual	<i>Equity in Method:</i> Reviewing alignment between aim statement, change idea, and PDSA cycle; planning measures to assess impact of change ideas.
Convening #5	June '24	In-person	Sharing success, challenges, and promising practice.

Note. Orientation and convenings included the full cohort of all schools and NIC governance. One-on-one meetings included one school team and representatives from NIC governance.

and family engagement, including the school-based equity roundtable (SBERT) policy, which requires a monthly meeting of school leaders, families, school staff, students, and community members to address racial inequities at each school. Students and family engagement were explicitly stated in criteria and guiding questions that the nonprofit and researchers provided for generating problem of practice formulation (e.g., “Reflects a pertinent problem that students, families, and staff from marginalized backgrounds agree should be addressed now”), conducting root cause analyses (“gather perspectives, experiences of students and families”), and developing aim statements and change ideas (e.g., “How will you engage students and families in the development of your aim statement and aligned action ideas?”). In addition, the nonprofit’s budgeting guidelines for schools explicitly “require[d] evidence of school community input with prioritization of students and family’s involvement in decision making.”

As these examples illustrate, NIC governance framed student and family involvement broadly, intentionally allowing schools to determine how engagement would make sense for their own community. The one consistent suggestion that NIC governance made was to use district-mandated SBERTs as the space for engaging families and students in the NIC’s equity-focused improvement science process. Schools, however, were not discouraged from utilizing other spaces for equitable student and family engagement. As the next section illustrates, each school site operationalized the messaging around equitable student and family engagement in unique ways while facing ongoing challenges in turning an equity orientation towards authentic student and family engagement into concrete action.

IMPLEMENTING EQUITABLE STUDENT AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN RPPs: SCHOOL-BASED STRATEGIES AND ROADBLOCKS

NIC governance emphasized *that* each school should authentically engage students and families in their school improvement work but left it up to each school to specify *how*. Not surprisingly, the strategies and challenges of engaging students and families in the NIC process looked different when each school brought the ideas from NIC convenings back to their school sites, with differences most pronounced by age of students served.

Equitable Engagement Strategies

Team Composition

NIC teams all included those working closest to families and/or students. Three schools included their family liaison, an existing district-designated school-based position with the responsibility of building the capacity of schools to authentically

engage families as full partners with the school in their child's development. Team members, including school leaders, educators, and other school staff, deemed their school's family liaison "instrumental" to the NIC process. One school included a parent as an active member of the NIC team. School staff spoke about how beneficial this was in getting more input from families, and other school team members highlighted that they would consider having a parent as a NIC team member in the future.

Leveraging Different Spaces for Student and Family Decision-Making

All schools had defined spaces and designated people to incorporate families and/or students as decision-makers. These spaces often pre-dated the school's NIC involvement. Three schools' NIC teams engaged the School Site Committee, which is a district-mandated elected governing body of the school that includes teachers and parents. School parent councils, open to all family members at a school, were another district-encouraged structure that two schools utilized to solicit family members' perspectives. Along with existing committees, schools used existing events (e.g., open houses, end-of-year BBQs, drop-off and pick-up) to solicit parent voice through street data collection. However, only high schools identified pre-existing spaces to bring student voice into the NIC process. These spaces included student government at Pathways High, a monthly Student Site Council at Garden Academy, and a bi-weekly school town hall at the Casa School.

Encouraged by NIC governance, two schools instituted a SBERT to bring families and students into the NIC process together. The SBERTs at Pathways High followed the district policy of having school staff, family members, and students attend. In their meetings, two students, two parents, and a handful of staff were present. The principal and family liaison facilitated these meetings, and provided coaching to staff prior to their first SBERT on how family members should be treated as "honored guests" and staff should be wary of airtime. The SBERT meetings that Courtyard Elementary hosted did not include students but two parents and the NIC school team.

Gaining Family and Student Perspective Through Street Data Collection

Most schools elicited family voice through street data, including short surveys during events or at school drop off and pick-up times, Zoom meetings with families, and family focus groups. NIC teams also discussed ways to incentivize parents to participate in street data collection, whether through stipends provided through the nonprofit grant, meals, or providing necessities (e.g., food pantry items, cleaning supplies, housing resources).

The three high schools also leaned in to collecting street data from students. For example, Garden Academy conducted three student-led focus groups during the 2023–2024 school year, organized by students’ home languages and facilitated by student leaders in their home languages: Spanish, Haitian Creole, Cape Verdean, Vietnamese, English, and Arabic. The school’s core NIC team first comes up with questions in advance for the students to ask, provides a training for student facilitators, and orders special lunch from outside vendors to incentivize students to stay. As NIC team members have shared, what was initially developed as a process for street data collection has become an intervention in itself for student empowerment. The Casa School’s NIC team developed a three-question survey on obstacles students faced when it came to attending school, with intentionality towards collecting as many different student perspectives as possible by getting students to fill the survey out during the school day. Following the survey, the NIC team conducted additional student focus groups to dive deeper into the obstacles that students identified.

On-the-Ground Challenges in Equitable Student and Family Engagement

As schools took steps to engage students and families in the NIC process, NIC members across schools also shared multiple challenges they experienced related to the age of the student population, representation, accessibility, and balancing time and priorities.

Grade-Band Challenges

The two elementary schools had not yet identified dedicated spaces or implemented methods to engage students as collaborators. Both schools had brainstormed possible ways of collecting street data on students’ literacy experiences but acknowledged that they had not collected that data. Further, whereas the high schools developed initiative approaches and built upon pre-existing spaces to elicit student voice, neither elementary school had existing spaces for student voice to build from. Conversely, high schools who engaged students in the NIC process pointed to structural barriers, such as rolling admissions for alternative high schools or finding time in the school day because the schedule always had a “credit-bearing utilitarian outlook” that focused solely on academic learning.

We also observed a reverse grade-band pattern when it came to family engagement as compared to student engagement. The alternative high schools found it easier to engage students rather than families, since students were already in the school building. They noted the specific challenges of having students older than 18, who may not want their parents to be engaged or who have family members that have already “checked out” of their children’s education.

Community Representation

Nearly all school teams agreed that families overall did not have enough voice in the NIC process, acknowledging, for example, low numbers for participation in SBERTs and family focus groups. NIC members also noted challenges related to community representation for those parents who did participate. For example, one school noted that they needed more input from non-Latinx/non-ESL families in School Parent Council, while a NIC member from another school shared that the school needed more participation from non-White parents.

Accessibility Challenges

Language accessibility included not having enough translation for non-native English speakers and accessibility in understanding the language of equitable literacy and school improvement. For example, NIC members from multiple schools noted that families did not know enough about the district literacy benchmark tests to prepare students for it or to interpret the scores. Other schools spoke more broadly of families not understanding the meaning of “equitable literacy” or the difference between various school committees and the NIC project. To respond to these challenges, schools provided translation and interpreters. For example, Garden Academy decided to use home language groups to engage families at their open house and in their student focus groups. Pathways High also recognized that professional language used in schools might be overwhelming to families and wanted to gain an understanding of what families understood equitable literacy to be as a first step.

Multiple schools also pointed to accessibility challenges as related to families physically coming into the school, whether due to transportation, timing of events, or schools historically not being welcoming to families from marginalized communities. As one NIC member shared of traditional spaces for family engagement: “Ballot, council, committee—feels like gatekeeping. It’s not inviting to parents, doesn’t feel like an invitation to dinner.” Others noted that certain staff at their school did not believe that it was the teachers’ job to engage families, which could also lead to schools feeling unwelcoming.

Time

Many NIC members discussed how hard it was to find the time to conduct improvement science activities amid competing priorities that those within their school community wanted to focus on, often unrelated to the NIC focus on equitable literacy. A second time-related challenge involved finding time to schedule new committees or groups that worked for families and staff. This connects to a common theme we heard across schools of the time it takes to set up structures and protocols for engaging families *and* to build sufficient trust and relationships among families so that they elect to participate.

In sum, challenges that NIC members described in many ways align with challenges of engaging historically marginalized families and students in school governance overall. This suggests that the work of increasing family and student engagement in specific improvement science activities may need to exist alongside increasing family engagement in the culture and climate of the entire school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN EQUITY-ORIENTED RPPs

The unique strategies that schools in the NIC have developed and the ongoing challenges they experience as they work to authentically engage historically marginalized students and families as collaborators and decision-makers in equitable school improvement hold implications and raise important questions related to infusing equity principles within RPP work, particularly related to contextual factors, equitable relationships, and equity in method.

How can schools leverage existing policies and practices to promote authentic student and family engagement in RPPs? Nearly all schools leveraged school community assets that pre-dated the NIC, which suggests that certain foundational elements within the culture of a school may need to be established before diving into the technical work. Some of these initiatives were school-based, such as the Casa School having a strong emphasis on project-based learning and holding regular student town halls to promote student voice. Other schools capitalized on a multitude of district-level policies that promoted family engagement, such as the School Site Council, the Family Liaison position, and SBERTs.

The fact that there were numerous district policies to support family engagement could certainly be considered an enabling factor for equity-oriented RPP practices. Yet it was ultimately up to school leaders to determine whether and how those policies would be implemented. This implies that even when policies are in place, without enforcement mechanisms, school leaders and staff still need the dispositions and training to effectively utilize them. Further, as prior research shows, traditional committee models don't always work in drawing in marginalized families when they are structured in ways that focus solely on how families can reify school practices without learning from families and appreciating different ways that families engage in their children's learning (e.g., Han & Love, 2015; Kayser et al., 2021; Latunde, 2017; Protacio et al., 2020). As such, NIC teams should thoughtfully consider which existing policies are the right ones to leverage, or could be adapted, to best address their school's unique circumstances.

How can NICs balance tensions and trade-offs related to the time it takes to build equitable relationships? As data from the first year of the NIC for Equitable Literacy suggests, eliciting student and family involvement

takes a lot of time and intentional effort. There is a trade-off when expanding partnerships to include students and families. Involving more people requires more time to execute the work, particularly when it comes to gathering the perspectives of *all* community members. This can brush up against established timelines by research teams to conduct research in schools. Our NIC governance responded to this by giving schools the space to, as one NIC member put it, “set the table” to establish those relationships before diving into the details of improvement science.

Yet this decision also created tension with an urgency that many school staff felt to take action. As such, many schools in the cohort devoted more energy to either family engagement or student engagement, with somewhat of an inverse relationship between the focus on family and student engagement for schools serving younger and older students, as elementary schools had more previously established engagement spaces for families and high schools had more for students. RPPs may need to provide more targeted grade-level supports and evidence-based examples for how to engage students and families at different grade levels (e.g., Adams & Palmer, 2017; Collier & Kuo, 2014; Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; Mac Iver et al., 2018; Robbins & Searby, 2013).

The NIC for Equitable Literacy launched about halfway through the school year, which may have presented an additional challenge of building equitable relationships with urgency. Research shows that key strategies to support marginalized families’ engagement include communicating early and consistently throughout the school year through channels that best meet caregivers’ needs and support long-term relationships (e.g., Bauer, 2023; Robbins & Searby, 2013; Parks, 2018). Therefore, rather than recruiting schools in the fall, NIC governance should recruit schools at the end of the prior school year so that schools can begin communicating with families about the NIC process right at the beginning of the school year.

How can students and families be engaged at the school and network level? For NIC schools, engaging students and engaging families as authentic partners in RPPs became two distinct processes that required unique strategies and resources. There were, however, some common strategies applied to both groups, including: focusing attention on having everyone feel welcome in the building, utilizing and/or adapting existing infrastructure for engagement, ensuring that students and families can participate in their home languages, giving students and families multiple access points for participation (e.g., collecting different forms of street data, providing leadership opportunities on equity teams), and providing students and families reciprocity in return for their participation (e.g., food, stipends).

At the network level, governance should consider who is attending convenings. While NIC governance did not provide requirements as to who should be

on each school's core team, schools organically had teams with representation of staff who interface directly with students and families. In designing future NICs with a focus on authentic family and student engagement, it may be important to require schools to have NIC team members that represent students and that represent families.

Researchers might also give schools space to build trust and processes for engagement with students and families—and not press data collection until schools feel in a comfortable place. This involves building time for relationship-building before planning to collect data from parent and student collaborators and having conversations with school-based NIC team members about how they want researchers involved in data collection for historically marginalized school community members. Multiple NIC schools preferred to wait to involve external researchers in interviewing students or families until they had established trust and rapport with their school-level equity teams. In planning for street data collection and practical measure collection, school teams also appreciated the technical support of researchers in coming up with street data collection protocols but felt most comfortable collecting the data themselves from families and students. Researchers should honor those requests and ensure that they delineate meetings to determine data collection processes that are the least disruptive to schools' ability to welcome and engage students and families in various aspects of research aimed at improving racial equity.

How can improvement science be used to promote equity in methods that support student and family engagement? Improvement science proved to be a useful and feasible methodology for engaging perspectives of students and families, specifically through collecting street data during root cause analyses (Safir & Dugan, 2021). One school also began Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles on their street data collection method of student-led focus groups, suggesting the benefits of using PDSA cycles on how to improve engagement of students or families before diving into instruction-oriented equity topics.

CONCLUSION

The NIC for Equitable Literacy provides a concrete case of how schools, community, and research partners can initiate student and family engagement as a core equity principle within RPP work. Our experiences also suggest that establishing these equitable relationships takes considerable intentionality and time and that practices for equitable school community engagement must be adapted to the unique community context of individual schools. As such, we invite RPPs serving students in different communities to explore how equitable relationships with students and families can be operationalized in diverse contexts.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter focused on how a networked improvement community can help engage with students and families navigating racial inequities in their school systems. In particular, it touches on the *equity in topic*, *equity in methods*, and *equitable RPP relationships* components of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. What strategies did the NIC for Equitable Literacy employ to effectively engage historically marginalized students and families in the school improvement process, and how might these strategies be adapted to other contexts?
2. How does the NIC for Equitable Literacy model operationalize the principles of equity within research-practice partnerships? In what ways do the authors suggest that equitable relationships can influence educational outcomes?
3. What specific challenges did the schools in the NIC for Equitable Literacy face when attempting to foster authentic relationships with students and families? How can these challenges inform the practices of other RPPs aiming to enhance community involvement?
4. How was improvement science utilized in the NIC for Equitable Literacy to facilitate meaningful engagement with community members? What are the implications of using this methodology for addressing systemic inequities in education?
5. The chapter emphasizes the importance of time and intentionality in developing equitable relationships. What recommendations do the authors provide for RPPs regarding building trust with students and families, and how can these be implemented in different educational settings?

NOTES

- 1 The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching identifies six core improvement science principles: (1) Make the work problem specific and user centered; (2) address variation in performance to understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions; (3) see the system that produces the current outcome; (4) develop practical measures to improve at scale; (5) anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry of plan-do-study-act rapid testing cycles; and (6) accelerate learning through networked communities (Bryk et al., 2015).
- 2 Street data refers to fine-grained qualitative and experiential data that capture the lived experiences of students, families, and staff (Safir & Dugan, 2021).
- 3 This aligns with the district's instructional focus on equitable literacy. The district defines equitable literacy as standards aligned, guided by the individual needs of students, culturally affirming, built on student's existing schema and funds of knowledge, and including five evidence-based literacy practices.

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Theme 4: Navigating Contextual Factors and Systems



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Looking at Equity Through the Rearview Mirror

Reflections From an RPP Project Focused on Well-Being of Educators in a Rural School District

Isela Peña, Rodolfo Rincones, Holly Fields, Jeannie Meza-Chavez, and Rogelio Segovia

In September of 2021, the Paso Del Norte Partnership for Education Research (PDNPER) at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) hosted a hybrid symposium focused on educator well-being. A few months later, two UTEP researchers partnered with one urban and two rural school districts to study educator well-being. This study sought to examine and better understand the general well-being of educators in the El Paso region. Well-being was broadly defined to include stress levels, compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue, burnout, and self-care practices. Educators included teachers, assistant principals, principals, and other staff that played a campus leadership role such as instructional coaches, librarians, and counselors. In this chapter, we do not present the well-being study findings but rather utilize our research project as a case to explore equity issues in our research-practice partnership (RPP). This chapter explores the presence and centering of equity in the RPP composed of the researchers at UTEP and practitioners at San Elizario Independent School District (SEISD). These individuals, who also serve as the co-authors of this chapter, include the following:

- Jeannie Meza-Chavez, superintendent, and Rogelio Segovia, associate superintendent, of San Elizario Independent School Districts
- Holly Fields, former assistant director of PDNPER
- Isela Peña, assistant professor, and Rodolfo Rincones, associate professor, both in the Educational Leadership and Foundations Department at UTEP.

We begin the chapter with a brief overview of UTEP, the PDNPER, SEISD and the community it serves, and the context of the region where our RPP is situated.

THE PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS

University of Texas at El Paso

UTEP serves over 24,000 students, of which 84% are Hispanic (University of Texas at El Paso, n.d.). It offers 169 bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs; has eight colleges and schools; and has more than \$109 million in research expenditures. UTEP has been awarded the community engagement classification and R1 status from the Carnegie Foundation. Its physical campus sits adjacent to Interstate 10, which runs parallel to the Rio Grande in the central area of El Paso. From certain buildings on the campus, our sister city, Ciudad Juarez, is visible. El Paso, located in the far west corner of Texas, is also geographically isolated from other major cities in the state. This fact is important, as it “has created a closed-loop system for the preparation of K-12 educators and school leaders in the region” (Peña et al., 2022, p. 8). UTEP has prided itself on the fact that partnerships with area school districts have been well established for years, in part through the work of previous leadership in the college, but also realized through the notion of the region’s “closed loop.” Elements of this closed-loop context include the isolated geographical location of El Paso from other major metroplex areas in the state and, for a long time, a community where UTEP was the only four-year institution serving the region. This created the conditions where local high school graduates attend and graduate from UTEP, in this case with teaching degrees, return to the local schools to teach, return to UTEP for additional degrees and certification, and continue to serve in the schools as campus and district leaders. The closed loop also builds relationships between UTEP’s college of education faculty and the students, opening the door to potential research partnership. The closed loop allowed for partnerships to exist without formalities (e.g., without a memorandum of understanding or other formal written agreements and based on verbal agreements). We believe this closed loop was part of the success of the launch of UTEP’s new RPP.

Paso Del Norte Partnership for Education Research

In the fall of 2019, the College of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso launched a new goal—to establish a framework for a sustainable education research-practice partnership among all area school districts with the expectation that school districts’ needs mattered and were worthy of research. Research focusing on the needs and priorities of area school districts and impacting student outcomes has helped enhance the relationship between the College of Education and area school districts. The mission, vision, and goals were established in the first few weeks of inception. Through a collaborative process and based on a shared belief in the cultural identity of the region in which UTEP resides, the new RPP was named the Paso del Norte Partnership for Education Research. The

Paso del Norte region encompasses three main geographic areas—El Paso and the surrounding community; Ciudad Juarez, Mexico; and southern New Mexico. Due to the global health crisis, partnership development was more widely accepted among area school districts simply due to their new priorities and the need to find solutions to address them quickly.

Developing strong partner relationships based on trust is essential for the success of RPPs (Coburn et al., 2013; Tseng et al., 2017). Developing new relationships with area partners in a virtual work environment was initially considered a hindrance rather than a help. However, by 2020, the Paso del Norte Partnership for Education Research had established five formal partnerships with local school districts. As the pandemic unfolded, the researchers were acutely aware of the needs of local schools as students in their respective courses shared many of those challenges. As mentioned in the introduction, the PDNERP hosted a symposium focused on educator well-being in September of 2021. Capitalizing on the work of PDNERP and the 2021 symposium, the two UTEP researchers partnered with one urban and two rural school districts to study educator well-being. One of the rural school districts was SEISD.

The work of the PDNERP was instrumental to formalizing RPP work as a priority for UTEP's College of Education. While we do not downplay its role and importance, the work of this RPP has a deeper meaning to the co-authors of this chapter. The meaning of this RPP work derives from a personal space that holds notions of who we believe we are as individuals and is rooted in the sociopolitical space that the border occupies.

San Elizario Independent School District

The partnering schools district, SEISD is located in a farming community along the international border of the United States and Mexico that rests just south of El Paso, Texas. SEISD serves approximately 3,207 students and consists of one high school, one middle school, three elementary schools, and a primary school. Almost all (99%) of the students in the district are Hispanic, with approximately 51% enrolled in bilingual education; about 91% are classified as economically disadvantaged. Despite the challenges presented by the student population it serves, SEISD is committed to creating pathways to learning, believes in every student, and is committed to serving its community. The district provides a broad range of academic programs to serve the needs of its students, including (1) special education program/services to identified disabled children who reside within the district beginning on the third birthday through age twenty-two; (2) Bilingual Education and English as Second Language programs that emphasize the mastery of English language skills that will enable emergent bilingual students to master the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS); (3) dual language education program available for students in pre-kindergarten through third grade, with the

program growing into the next grade level each year; and (4) an award-winning Naval Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (NJROTC) program for those students interested in exploring the military world.

Another source of pride for SEISD is that San Elizario High School is home to many student-athletes in cross-country and soccer who have won numerous team state championships. Over the years, SEISD has established itself as a true community of champions, taking purposeful action to create a place of pride and reflection through the construction of the Pathway of Champions Plaza to honor the 9 UIL state athletic titles earned by athletics: six monuments representing the multiple state championships in boys cross-country and three monuments representing the boys soccer state titles. Since 2007, the SEISD has welcomed consecutive state championships in Skills USA and athletics and even garnered a 2013 Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year state win. Each win proves that the district's small size and the zip code location are not barriers to success. This physical and symbolic monument inspires future students to see themselves as true champions and communicates to all that SEISD truly is the place where eagles soar.

CONTEXT FRAMING RPP MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVES

The partnership between UTEP and SEISD is situated in a unique historical and sociocultural, political, and economic context. Through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo 1848, the US purchased a large portion of northern Mexico, including what today is the southwest region of Texas. The city of San Elizario, where San Elizario ISD is located, was established in 1598. It is one of the smallest cities located in the transborder metropolis of El Paso–Juárez, which lies in the US–Mexico contiguous border region. This region is the second busiest crossing in the entire US–Mexico border.

The influence of Mexican culture in this region has been historically significant due to the original inhabitants but also to the constant immigration waves between both countries. Almost 96% of the city of the San Elizario is of Hispanic descent; 93.5% of the people speak a language different from English at home, with a median income of \$46,486; approximately 29% of the people live under the poverty line; and 31.4% of the population under the age of 65 is uninsured (US Census Bureau, 2024).

Historically, the El Paso region, including San Elizario, has been politically liberal, whereas the majority of the state of Texas is conservative. These political inclinations are present in the educational system of the state. This political context has often left San Elizario at odds with the state, as is evidenced by the current lawsuit filed by numerous school districts against the Texas Education Agency over changes to the “A–F” Accountability Rating system proposed by the education commissioner, of which SEISD is a plaintiff.

We offer this brief context because it frames the perspectives of each of the individuals in the UTEP-SEISD RPP. It is against this backdrop that decisions around the RPP were made, including research topics to study and what motivates and drives the RPP members to engage in this work. This context is also part of the rationale for selecting *Pláticas* (described subsequently) as a methodology to examine our RPP relationship, specifically how we centered equity in the selection of the topic for the well-being study that served as the impetus for our RPP. The deviation from studying the impact of the pandemic on accountability and rather centering on the well-being of SEISD's staff also underscores the tension that has historically existed between the El Paso and San Elizario region with the rest of the state of Texas.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this chapter, we intend to illustrate how members of two organizations with different institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012) collaborated to establish, develop, and consolidate our understanding of the selection of well-being as our research topic, focusing on centering humanity and equity in this process. Although collaborative work is familiar to us, collaborating on identifying research topics based on an equity framework was uncharted territory for many of us, especially given the work demands and time constraints of the practitioners who co-authored this chapter.

Scholarly research on the inner workings involved in establishing a practice-research partnership is complex. Research demonstrates steps and phases in establishing RPPs but is limited in exploring the inner workings of establishing an RPP and the initial agenda (Peña et al., 2022). The literature is even more limited when establishing RPPs between higher education institutions and rural school districts. This research intends to contribute to that purpose.

Therefore, to better understand the experiences of the co-authors, our narrated stories were necessary. We selected *Pláticas* as a methodology because its main principles align with the purpose of this research. *Pláticas* has been defined as “a conversational strategy to collect data and carry out research that is an extension of particular ways of knowing” (Flores Carmona, et al., 2021, p. 1213). Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) argue that “*platicando* has been a pivotal and necessary component of traversing academic spaces that has allowed us to weave the personal and academic” (p. 99).

Pláticas is a methodology that allows us to engage in open and honest discussions where we share our positionality, our experience in working with this RPP, and what this experience means to each of us. Touted as culturally appropriate and considered a Chicana/Latina feminist methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), we nevertheless saw it as fitting our needs because through *Pláticas*, we were able to engage in more intimate conversations about our topic,

especially given that we wanted to address the ethics of the process for identifying research topics in the RPP.

We utilized *Pláticas* as a methodology trying to attend, as much as possible, to the principles specified by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016). In our case, we wanted to honor everyone's voices and opinions and give each the same epistemological weight as we co-constructed and reconstructed meaning and knowledge, both individually and as a collective. We also made conscientious efforts to connect our lived experiences and the research topic. Our *Pláticas* also strengthened our relationships, creating a safe space for self-discovery. We spent time talking about where we were from and our identities, as well as bringing our core beliefs to the open. *Pláticas* proved to be an excellent process to hear our ideas and voices and scrutinize each other; this process continued as we went on with our lives away from the group, as we kept reflecting on key points expressed in our conversations. Last, *Pláticas* assisted us in building our relationships on reciprocity and allowed us to be vulnerable and engage in reflexivity as we questioned each other, sought clarifications, and openly admitted our lack of knowledge.

For our *Pláticas*, we developed a series of questions utilizing the Equity in RPP Design framework to keep our conversations focused on the topic of equity. For example, we reflected on the influence of our geographic context in our individual and collective efforts to integrate our own understanding of equity into the RPP relationship and decision-making process. To honor the time commitments of two of the authors given the nature of their positions at SEISD, one of the author's roles was to keep us on task. Yet, even with this limitation, our *Pláticas* evolved organically.

We held two in-person *Pláticas*, each lasting about one and a half hours. Each *Plática* was recorded and transcribed with NVivo Transcription. The transcriptions were shared in OneDrive, and participants had access to the *Pláticas* to review for accuracy and clarification, which also allowed us to reflect upon our conversations. We made sure, in the spirit of openness and transparency, that all participants were involved in the co-creation of knowledge, as suggested by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016).

INSIGHTS REVEALED IN THE PLÁTICAS

From our *Pláticas*, there were several themes that emerged related to the Equity in RPP Design framework utilized in this study, specifically how the RPP centered in humanity and equity in the selection of the research topic. In the sections that follow, we share the insights revealed during our *Pláticas*, presenting these ideas utilizing our first names when referencing direct quotes in the true spirit of *Pláticas* efforts to decolonize knowledge. Our presentation is not exhaustive of everything shared during the *Pláticas*. Rather, the selected quotes reflect instances where high levels of agreement were displayed through head nodding and verbal

confirmations. We present the three main insights revealed in our *Pláticas* that are connected to how equity and humanity were centered in our selection of the topic: (1) Turning a shared traumatic experience into purpose, (2) “The border is me,” and (3) “Don’t ask the question unless you really want to know the answers.”

Turning a Shared Traumatic Experience Onto Purpose

In March of 2020, COVID-19 thrust the world into a lockdown of most day-to-day operations. Locally, area school districts and universities quickly shifted instruction and learning from the normal in-person environment to a virtual learning environment in days. Educators had to shift their mindsets and pedagogies, adjusting to this new method of teaching and learning. Some were quite adaptive and successful, while others struggled. This shift was further compounded by loss of normalcy and, in some cases, life. During the height of COVID-19, we were reminded that change and uncertainty are inevitable elements of the human experience.

As we reflected on our RRP work, what surfaced in our *Pláticas* was that the identification of the research topic and the development of the RPP stemmed from our collective experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. Prompted by what was occurring, each of us was navigating our roles and responsibilities at work and home. The stories and experiences of our students—for the SEISD partners, the students and their families; for the UTEP partners, the students enrolled in the university’s educational leadership graduate programs—seeped into our own psyches. As we combined and internalized these with our own understanding and confrontation with the pandemic, issues of well-being, including physical and mental health, became a moral responsibility.

A few months after the 2021 PDNERP Symposium, the UTEP researchers, Isela and Rodolfo, met with Jeannie, and within a few minutes of pitching the well-being study to her, she agreed to enter into the partnership. As SEISD’s superintendent, she had observed her staff and seen “employees who were having different issues, experiencing depression” and facing “all sorts of tragedies” during the height of the pandemic. This study provided the district an opportunity to explore well-being. Jeannie reflected, “we were looking for different aspects to involve the mental wellness part, the fitness of our employees.” She also described sharing with her staff: “Our job is to create that solid base, that place that, *dónde pueden pisar firme*. And if we can’t do that, then we’re being selfish.” We all nodded in agreement. Reflecting further, Isela shared, “sometimes you get so busy . . . in the day-to-day job, that you forget you’re dealing with human beings and that every human being matters, whether they’re 40 years old or 4 years old.”

At the outset, our individual and collective traumatic experiences led us to an agreement on the selection of the well-being study. Utilizing the *Pláticas*, to look back at our process to develop the partnership, we find that our partnership

was strengthened in our identification of humanity in our study. An example of the continuation of our work was when SEISD moved to implement a four-day work week in the fall 2023, and we agreed to continue collaborating to study this policy's effects.

“The Border Is Me”

Throughout the *Pláticas*, most of us expressed the influence of the broad sociopolitical and cultural context on our views and practices. Noticeable was the influence of the geopolitical demarcation commonly known as the US–Mexico border. The border was at the center of personal, collective, and professional identities; ethnicities; and lived and perceived inequalities, particularly in the educational systems.

The geopolitical border creates and recreates our ways of thinking and acting. On several occasions, issues emerged reflecting the intricately woven connections between these two bi-national regions where SEISD and the community it serves are located and where the authors of this chapter live and work. Some of us have lived most of our lives in the borderland region of Texas and Chihuahua, México, and were very familiar with crossing the border to do different types of activities such as visiting family, medical doctors, and going to restaurants or buying groceries. Some of us are intimately familiar with immigration issues. For example, Rogelio reflected on his time spent in Mexico visiting family members:

[H]aving that experience [border crosser] makes me who I am, . . . and so absolutely all of these students that we address and that we serve, really every single one of them is a reflection of me . . . their English pronunciation, well that's me. If I see that they're struggling because there's a home situation, that's me.

Mirroring Rogelio's reflection, Jeannie expressed how she experiences the border,

[T]he whole border is part of the work that I've been, I guess, destined to do because here, you know, I see myself in [the students]. And I see my parents, you know, in their parents, I see my parents. So, I think the fundamental [thing] is that we know the struggle of these kids because we are one of them.

Rodolfo, who is from Mexico, has family in both countries and considers himself a transnational borderlander (Martinez, 1994); for him this means that he “can move at ease in both the United States and Mexico, is fully bilingual in English and Spanish, and [has] professional knowledge about educational systems on both sides of the border.” Isela echoed this borderlander sentiment, expressing, “for me, my heart beats half in Mexico and half in the United States. So, I'm very much . . . a *fronteriza*.”

Another aspect that all of us are very familiar with is the issue of commuter students from Ciudad Juárez; we talked and reflected on how these students are affected by the increasing militarization and surveillance of the border and the impact of the closure of the border during the pandemic. Students could not cross, and many did not have technology or internet services to attend virtual classes. Serving students who live this reality daily, our colleagues from the school district understand this clearly.

Jeannie and Rogelio contributed to the understanding of the commuter students and recent immigrant students and provided a clear and unambiguous window as to why district leadership is highly concerned with the well-being of students, staff, and educators. They depicted *cariño* (authentic care) (Valenzuela, 1999) by constantly expressing and seeking solutions to address the needs of everybody in their district's schools. They understood that to have successful students, they needed everybody in the district to be first and foremost healthy, enabling them to carry out their duties.

Despite the challenges faced by students, we all asserted the assets-based approach to education (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The language we speak in our *Pláticas* reflected this approach, including how it permeates views about bilingualism, for example. Rogelio was unabashedly clear about this. He asserted, "I continue to think in Spanish, that's the beauty of being born [sic], I think in Spanish, I dream in Spanish, I speak Spanish at home." Rogelio's personal experience offered evidence of what the school district was doing programmatically. He offered this in that regard,

It can kind of help us strengthen . . . what we're doing in terms of our work with the dual language program. Like we see the gifts in these children. And I think that that's something to be said because I think even UTEP, look at how many international students it serves.

We could not help but notice the leadership ethos that Jeannie and Rogelio were establishing. This leadership ethos, as defined by Hannah and Jennings (2013), is "the purposeful and principled moral and ethical self that reflects the values, principles, ideals of—and duties and obligations to—the collective to which the leader belongs" (p. 9). They were doing this by embedding their internalized obligations into their identities and moral selves and having in high regard the principles and ideals of the border community that they serve, even in the face of adversity caused by the pandemic.

This led us collectively to reflect on what this could mean for future collaborations and a future research agenda. We reaffirmed that the well-being project emerged from this ethos of *cariño* and that any future research project that would fit and support this ethos would be welcomed by this school district. Understanding that the border is us and how this intricate connection to the geographic place

shapes our individual and collective identities is the impetus for continuing to nurture our RPP, establishing equitable RRP structures, and identifying the goals for research projects (present and future) with equity in mind.

“Don’t Ask the Question Unless You Really Want to Know the Answers”

While our *Pláticas* surfaced our similar understanding of the border and shared commitment to the community, research topic and the partnership, tensions were also revealed. These tensions were impacted by external factors, such as the fact that we work for and in distinct organizational environments whose aims do not always align (Denner et al., 2019). For example, the university where the researchers work is focused on research productivity, while the school district partners are focused on student learning and well-being. The emphasis and efforts to achieve these different goals inevitably influence our state of mind and behaviors in this RPP work. Yet what is also displayed in the *Pláticas* is a willingness from all of us to listen to each other and sit in the tension with the hopes of identifying that middle ground and learning to do this in a way that better suits all of us.

Embedded in the natural rhythm of the *Pláticas*, we find moments where it is evident that the professor has entered the conversation. For example, when responding to the questions, Jeannie’s and Rogelio’s responses were often anchored on what was happening in their district, firmly centered on the practitioner’s role. In response, Rodolfo and Isela would attempt to lift the most important thing being shared. In particular, Rodolfo, given his extensive experience as a professor and researcher, would pose questions framed by theory or ask follow-up questions attempting to theorize their actions or decision points.

For example, as we discussed our own definitions of equity, Rodolfo shared that his definition “comes from the feminist movement,” and it’s defined “as the three R’s”: “the first R means you have to be recognized for who you are”; the second R is about the “redistribution of resources, that we get our fair share”; and the third R is about “representation; we need to be able to vote, but also be voted into a position where we represent the needs and wants of the other people.” He also framed his definition in the context of his teaching. Our other concepts of equity in the group included the image reflecting “that student that may need a little higher stool to be able to see within that group” or over the fence (Holly), to education becoming a “game changer when children know that education can help them” (Jeannie). For Rogelio, the definition pushed him to a more critical space, prompting him to ask whether “more work” around equity is necessary “within the Mexican-American population.” Isela asked isn’t “equity also about hope?” While these definitions were perhaps circling around similar themes, the term “equity” was not definitively defined. What was evident was the different

lenses everyone used to define the word, and therein lies the tension. How we perceive the work around well-being and our approach to studying the topic is framed by the lens we use to observe and derive conclusions.

The lens by which we frame this issue is impacted by the two separate and distinct environments in which we operate. For us in higher education, we are not concerned with state accountability systems in the way and to the degree our PreK-12 partners are. In this RPP, we would expect that chasm to be the source of tension, but throughout our *Pláticas*, a more nuanced tension surfaced. We discussed the fact that well-being is not in the state standards and how funding to address well-being is lacking. Rogelio shared that he believes “the educational state accountability, actually, is a hindrance to this work.” Jeannie pointed out the “politicized” nature of the accountability system and how it further “marginalizes students within these school systems.” Yet despite understanding that their schools and district would receive a rating from the state derived from the accountability system, the leadership at SEISD selected well-being as the focus for the RPP work. Jeannie shared, “We’re going to have healthy teachers for our kids and who doesn’t want that? Who doesn’t want a spectacular teacher teaching children?” While anticipating that the impact of addressing well-being would result in improved student outcomes, it became clear that SEISD was taking the largest risk in this RPP. Jeannie’s commitment to the well-being of her staff outweighed the state’s focus on accountability ratings. Absent her commitment, the state’s priorities would have hindered our ability to develop a RPP that focused on the pandemic’s impact on the well-being of the staff, rather than on the impact on test scores.

This also impacted how the conversation shifted and flowed between that practitioner lens to the researcher perspective. In reflecting on why this work is important, Rodolfo expressed:

When we engage in this kind of work . . . at least in my case, I think, how can this be relevant to you? Help you? How could I be cognizant also that, you know, I have to publish, have an evaluation and all of those things, but to me it’s more important, can I do this to help you? And how can we make this relevant to you so you can use that in some way, and it can be something of use to you?

Similarly, in reflecting on her role in the RPP work, Holly offered the following perspective:

How can I be that nexus, that liaison to help build and develop relationships? And so I want to make sure that we’re cognizant of your needs, that we’re listening, that we understand what is most important, what are the most driving issues that keep you awake at night that force you to lose sleep, that that

causes angst and anxiety, that are worthy of research and truly have impact on student outcomes?

Speaking directly to the perspective SEISD has about RPP work, Jeannie voiced:

We have to be willing to want to know the answers . . . even if they're not the most favorable, because if we know something in our system that's not working, then it's going to keep us from, you know, figuring out how we make it better. And to me, it's like, how do we make it better for kids?

Candidly, she also offered,

don't ask the question unless you really want to know the answers. And sometimes those answers can be gathered through a survey. They can be gathered through, you know, dialogue like this. But I think what we have learned in watching, especially everything that's happened with the pandemic, [is] observe, come in and see.

She further explained that “[t]o strengthen the partnership, observe, because I think rather than just asking us, I think you can come in and see, then you're going to be like, oh, we could study this.”

Contrary to the common reservation of allowing outsiders into their schools to conduct research (Denner et al., 2019), Jeannie made us an open invitation to go in and observe. The challenge in RPPs is often that the “researchers are rarely trained to work effectively with practitioners” (Denner et al., 2019, para. 2). In our case, three researchers have a practitioner background, each having worked in public school systems prior to moving into academe. The two practitioners hold PhDs and are familiar with the work of researchers. While this shared practitioner experience and understanding of research helped in our mutual understanding of each other's points of views, needs, and vision for the work, it did not eliminate the tension that exists between public schools and universities. Each of us struggled with squaring our personal and professional interests in the research topic with the others and within the larger context of our organizations. Our RRP is in a development phase and has limited to no resources to support the work. While this slows down the progress of the work, our individual commitment to the work and our communities allows us to continue nurturing the RPP.

FINAL COLLECTIVE REFLECTIONS AND REMAINING TENSIONS

Our understanding and exploration of our RPP work is ongoing. Moving forward, we anticipate repeating this reflexive exercise, *Pláticas*, to better understand our

partnership, the research, and how to build a stronger bridge between SEISD and UTEP. Unique to our partnership is how deeply rooted we are in our border community and the extent to which we see ourselves reflected in the people we serve and research. As a result, our motives and intentions are aligned to improve the life outcomes and experiences of the students, families, and staff serving the SEISD community. This work, however, is not free of tensions that emerge in RPPs, such as which partner sets the research agenda, including selection of topic and methodology; drives the work, and sets the pace for the collection and dissemination of the findings. By embracing these tensions, we determined how to address them as we collaborated on the work, namely respectfully and positively acknowledging the different perspectives of the individual members of the RPP. By doing so, we allowed for diverse points of view to emerge, thus enriching our *Pláticas*.

Evident in our *Pláticas* is that we see ourselves reflected in each other. This creates mutual respect and caring for the other. In the spirit of the *Pláticas*, we willingly engaged in honest dialogue around our RPP. Each of us remained open and brought our whole selves into the *Pláticas*. We removed our titles and the hierarchy of the partnership structure and allowed for the natural ebb and flow of the conversation to ensue. As this occurred, we created space to allow the weight of power dynamic inherent in these partnerships to constantly shift between each of us. The practitioners in the conversation were there to speak honestly about their needs and expectations, without the fear of reprisal or hurt feelings. The researchers in the room were there to learn, not so much to impart knowledge. We removed our theoretical frames of mind and emptied the contents of our individual baggage on the table so we could sift through it all and better understand one another as human beings first, then cultivate a space where our intentions in this work and our expected outcomes were better aligned. As the *Pláticas* continued, we were given the opportunity to rethink the value of our experiences as tools for knowledge creation. The format of the *Pláticas* also enabled us to let go of the constraints, including cognitive, embedded in our professional training, roles, and responsibilities.

The final takeaway for us is that in order for humanity and equity to be centered in RPP work, we must first be willing to recognize each other as equal participants in this journey. If we are unable to see our own humanity in the work, and each other's humanity reflected in the other, we cannot have authentic conversations about equity. RPPs are about human relationships. To strengthen collaborative work, the relationship must reflect reciprocity and mutuality. Honoring each other's epistemological stance, we willingly renegotiate the terms of the RPP, fully aware that our journey is not over. We are continually looking for opportunities to address the power dynamics embedded in our work and trying to find ways to engage with each other more authentically.

The RPP with SEISD is in its early stage of development, and as such, we are aware there is a lot of work to systematize our processes. While we have made some significant strides, tensions and challenges continue to persist. Moving forward, we need to be strategic in our planning efforts to cultivate a long-term research agenda for the RPP. The research approach to how we examine our relationships in this case was *Pláticas*. While this methodology worked well with the individuals in this RPP, we question whether we can utilize this methodology when working with other partners or in the context of other research topics to examine the partnership.

Contrary to traditional methodologies, *Pláticas* invites the subjectivity of the researchers and participants as they engage in a dialogical conversation giving way to the ongoing reflexivity and learning experienced by those engaged in the *Pláticas*. Certain conditions must be present for *Pláticas* to capture the narrative of the lived experiences reflecting the memories, emotions, and embodied knowledge, which include a high level of trust and vulnerability (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Trust and vulnerability give way for listening to each other with empathy and create a safe space for emotions to emerge and be held by the group. What is unique about the individuals who make up this RPP is that those conditions were quickly developed, in part because of pre-existing relationships between the researchers and district partners and because well-being was the topic of the original research study. The study of well-being centered on the humanity of the SEISD's employees that also involved emotions, high levels of trust, and vulnerability in the discussions surrounding the planning and implementation of the study. There was also an element of synchronicity between the district partners and researchers that resulted from the well-being study and was cemented by shared experience of living and working in a border context.

Another challenge is that we are currently operating without resources to support the work. Our RPP work is further hindered by our individual organizations' contexts. SEISD operates under the umbrella of the Texas education system, which has an inequitable funding system, is hyper-focused on accountability ratings, and is being pushed by the state's governor to create a voucher system. UTEP is currently undergoing a transformation to solidify its Very High Research Carnegie R1 status, which requires its faculty to engage in high research activity and obtain external research funding. As we perceive this RPP work, because of the focus on cultivating relationships between the researchers and the district partners, the production of scholarly work may not be aligned to the R1 status requirements. Yet we live in a community where many of the schools are underserved and serve marginalized populations. These contexts create tensions and challenges that require collective motivations and commitments to the research topics selected by the RPP partners.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter highlighted how the intentional use of a theoretical framework and honoring of community voices can help to facilitate effective RPP research in a rural setting. In particular, it touched on the *equitable RPP relationships* and *equity in project goals* components of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. How did the closed loop in this case study differentiate this RPP from other RPPs that don't have such a closed-loop community?
2. What role did the rural context play in how research- and practitioner-side partners approached this project?
3. This study used the Chicana feminist theoretical/methodological concepts of *pláticas*, *cariño*, and *borderlands*. How did these lenses and approaches support the equity work of the RPP?
4. There are a range of types of risks that can be involved in RPP work. What risk was the school district (practice side) taking in this case? How did this decision affect the partnership?

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Building an RPP With Equity in Mind

Delaware Early Literacy Research-Practice Partnership

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Early literacy is undeniably a critical issue when it comes to educational equity. It sets the foundation for a child's future academic success and overall development. However, not all children have equal access to quality early literacy experiences, leading to differential outcomes and opportunities. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that brings together research, policy, and practice—though historically such collaborations are difficult to achieve and rare. Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are widely recognized as a promising means of linking research, policy, and practice through the generation of locally relevant, responsive research evidence and collaborative interpretation and translation of findings into action. Furthermore, recent evidence points to the potential for RPPs to effectively address inequity and build more equitable relationships between research and practice (Doucet, 2019; Tseng et al., 2017).

The Delaware Early Literacy Research Practice Partnership (DEL RPP) was created to leverage the benefits of RPPs to address inequities in early literacy outcomes in our state. This work was further catalyzed by recent legislation, which created an opportunity to apply for external funds from a philanthropic organization that seeks to promote RPPs that address educational inequities. Early ideas seeded in the summer of 2021 have grown into a partnership between the University of Delaware (UD) and the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE), and although the DEL RPP is in its infancy, we believe that sharing the story of its initiation may offer practical insights for those working towards similar goals.

Ultimately, the DEL RPP unites the policy concerns of DDOE with the research capacity of UD faculty in shared commitments to educational equity

and collaboratively developed objectives described later in this chapter. UD and DDOE are hopeful to use this partnership as a blueprint for what productive and successful RPPs could look like between DDOE and UD. In this chapter, we discuss partnership development, how we navigated institutional collaboration, and the focus of partnership work. Using the guiding framework on RPP equity, the chapter will include a discussion of the ways in which equity is centered in the partnership and proposal, as well as the work that will need to be done to sustain an equity-centered RPP. In describing these aspects of the partnership work, we also discuss opportunities and constraints afforded by the Delaware social and political context, including educational priorities, system characteristics, and the climate for equity.

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

In this section we tell the story of how the DEL RPP came to exist. This includes sharing the broader motivation for its work—to improve early literacy outcomes statewide—and how the team was built. Within these discussions, we share how and why we attended to equity in the ways that we did, with particular attention to framework elements of conceptualizing *equity as a topic for RPP work* and *equitable RPP relationships*.

Centering Equity in Early Literacy Outcomes in Delaware

Nationally, issues of literacy have drawn renewed attention, focusing on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores and burgeoning into a crisis around the Science of Reading. In particular, not being able to read at a proficient level by third grade is associated with being less likely to graduate high school, further highlighting the importance of early literacy (Fiester, 2010). Delaware is no exception. Literacy—early literacy in particular—is a high priority, garnering substantial policy attention through statewide plans and legislation at the same time our RPP was being developed.

Delaware’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan, published in 2017, indicated the state’s interest in improving literacy achievement for all students pre-K through third grade with a specific focus on students with disabilities (SWDs) and multilingual learners (MLs). Subsequently, in 2019, the Delaware Literacy Plan was designed for teachers, leaders, and PK-12 partners to address the state’s literacy challenges. The plan’s strategic intents include implementing high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs), access to evidence-based instruction, and regular screening to identify potential delays in literacy skill acquisition (DDOE, 2019). The plan also describes opportunities for partnership between institutes of higher education, teachers, and leaders to address the strategic intents and improve professional learning opportunities related to the Science of Reading

(DDOE, 2019). This same commitment is evidenced in Delaware's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) II and III initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic and their free online repository of texts for students and professional learning opportunities focused on supporting struggling readers.

However, in 2022, only 25% of Delaware's fourth-grade students scored at or above proficiency in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), and only 51% of third-graders scored at or above grade level in English Language Arts on Delaware's state assessment (Delaware Open Data Council, 2022). Furthermore, 65% of Black students and 63% of Hispanic students were not proficient in reading by grade 3 (Delaware Open Data Council, 2022). Moreover, 65% of low-income, 67% of English learners, and 86% of students with disabilities were not proficient in reading in grade 3 (Delaware Open Data Council, 2022). Delaware is a local control state, which means that districts reserve the right to create and implement their own policies with minimal oversight, and as a result, the DDOE has limited access to K-2 literacy compliance data or local practices, which in turn limited DDOE's ability to understand the challenges schools faced in developing the necessary literacy skills students need to succeed in reading and writing by grade 3.

Citing these performance issues and gaps, Delaware passed legislation requiring the state to evaluate and incorporate the Science of Reading into its current curriculum and assessment practices to promote positive growth in student literacy outcomes. Delaware's State Senate Bill 4 (SB4) and House Bill 304 (HB304) acknowledge literacy as a fundamental skill and essential to academic and life-long success. Among other specific requirements, SB4 and HB304 require the following: (1) DDOE to maintain and publish a list of evidence-based reading instruction curricula aligned to the Science of Reading and use HQIM for kindergarten through grade three (SB4, 2022); (2) annual reports describing the implementation of evidence-based reading instruction curricula (SB4, 2022) and the number of students receiving interventions (HB304, 2022) from schools, districts, and DDOE; (3) students in kindergarten through grade 3 to participate in a universal reading screening three times each year to identify potential reading deficiencies, including dyslexia, and allow for early intervention and prevention (HB304, 2022); and (4) DDOE to compile a list of reading screeners and literacy intervention approaches aligned with the Science of Reading that charter schools and districts may use (HB304, 2022).

These contexts provided an exciting opportunity for the University of Delaware and the Delaware Department of Education to develop an RPP structured around equity and early literacy proficiency that meets local policy and research needs—one that was formed based on complementary expertise, mutual interest, and shared commitments.

Building the Partnership Team

Although the DEL RPP constituted a new endeavor for the individual members of the team, UD and the DDOE enjoy a long-standing, productive relationship around education in the state of Delaware. This includes professional learning and other technical assistance collaborations between various departments of DDOE and UD; representation of faculty and staff on statewide strategic planning task forces; representation of DDOE on UD advisory boards; joint work in teacher and leader preparation; collaborations on curriculum and instruction initiatives; and, of course, joint work on the post-secondary education of Delaware students. The relationship between DDOE and UD benefits from the small size of the state, which has supported frequent communication, engagement, and relationship-building across institutions. However, the university is interested in formalizing RPPs as another piece of their relationship. Tackling the challenges of early learning is a natural opportunity, given the state context and the expertise of faculty at the university.

One means of ensuring the RPP was built on a foundation of equitable relationships was to ensure early engagement was as inclusive as possible in developing the partnership. This meant finding and engaging stakeholders interested in this work. Initial facilitation team meetings focused primarily on ensuring the representation and contribution of research and practice partners from the start of our conversations. Members of UD's Partnership for Public Education (PPE) and the Collaborative for Data Driven Action (CDDA)—two units with missions dedicated to promoting collaborative research—began by contacting members of DDOE leadership that the units were both familiar with and who also led the departments that might be doing work related to recent literacy legislation to gauge their interest in partnering, and repeated that process with researchers who have expertise in early literacy. Then, PPE and CDDA brought everyone who demonstrated interest in partnering to a joint meeting to discuss individual research and practice interests related to early literacy. Based on a series of successful conversations, the collective group then decided to move forward with partnering.

The members of the DEL RPP evolved over time and meetings to include those committed to the partnership work, with a broader set of stakeholders interested in learning from the project. The overall partnership includes three teams: the DOE Academic Support Team, the UD research team, and the implementation team. The DDOE team includes the associate secretary of the DDOE Academic Support Team; director of Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development; and the early literacy associate for the DDOE. The UD research team includes three faculty members from two academic units, with expertise in literacy education, early education policy, and applied child development. The implementation team, also based in UD, consisted of members of PPE and CDDA (mentioned previously).

However, now that our partnership has been established, we are exploring ways to engage additional stakeholders to contribute to and provide feedback on our work—particularly those impacted by the research and research-informed decisions to be made in Delaware schools (e.g., educators, leaders, and parents). We have noted this in reflecting on our work to date and have begun to bring local education agencies (LEAs) into the work not only to facilitate the research and data sharing but to authentically get their ideas and on what things we could do to support equity in their contexts. We plan to accomplish this by inviting LEAs to our planning meetings going forward in order to ensure that local, on-the-ground voices provide more focus on specific issues faced by our schools.

The RPP recognizes that in spite of its intent to get the “right” people at the table, important voices are still missing—voices that offer lived experiences and perspectives not present in the current team and representing those experiencing inequitable opportunities and outcomes. The team understands that creating a more diverse team will result in diverse perspectives being represented in the work and in outcomes. Further, the team recognizes that greater engagement will improve buy-in for the research agenda as well as implementation of findings—ultimately directed at improving equality of literacy outcomes statewide.

We have used the past two years to engage members of the DDOE and UD teams with shared interests and expertise in early literacy, and have started to engage a broader set of stakeholders such as district literacy leaders, the Early Literacy Advisory Council, the literacy coalition, teacher educators, coaches, and professional development providers. However, the team has not yet developed a strategy for engaging members of groups experiencing inequities within the education system, and we as a team anticipate this process to be fraught by mistrust and historical context of marginalization. The DEL RPP is an overwhelmingly white team, representing predominantly white institutions, and this task will take both time and caution.

NAVIGATING INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION

With members of the RPP established, we set about addressing the early literacy needs of the state. But *how* we thought about and engaged in that work reflected continued commitments to equity through processes and decision-making. In this section, we share stories of how equitable collaboration resulted in shared goals and how we continue to work together to achieve them.

Co-Creating Shared Priorities

A powerful motivation for RPPs is disrupting the typical pattern of researchers identifying questions and goals independent of policy or practice input—even with the best intentions. This creates an imbalance that often results in research that is not relevant, timely, useful, or even used. A more equitable approach

balances the needs and concerns of practitioners and researchers. Our partnership utilized a participatory approach to allow all partners' knowledge to be brought together to learn from each other (Fransman & Newman, 2019). Through this process, we jointly (rather than independently) identified priorities for the partnership research agenda that reflect *both* the local context for early literacy and recent research on early literacy and the systems and structures that support literacy opportunities and outcomes. Over several months, our team co-created the following research priorities intended to guide our work and application of findings in policy and practice. Within each priority area, we developed sets of research questions, policy questions, and practice questions. We started this process using Google spreadsheets with simple columns for each so that partnership members could contribute to, discuss, and negotiate. For example, under the second priority, the team established the following questions:

Research Questions

1. What individual characteristics and experiences of children (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, and prior ECE [early childhood education] experiences), prior to school entry, contribute to students' early literacy achievement in K-2?
2. Additionally, beyond student characteristics, what teacher and school factors contribute to students' K-2 literacy achievement?
3. How does the influence of child-, teacher-, and school-level factors differ by ECE experiences, family background, language background, and personal characteristics, including those identified as bases for inequality in early literacy outcomes?

Policy and Practice Questions

1. What student-level literacy and language assessments are available for analysis?
2. What teacher-collected measures (e.g., early childhood survey data) are available to assess literacy and language instruction?
3. To what extent are the measures culturally and racially responsive and equitable according to the DDOE framework for culturally responsive education?

Reflecting on the value of co-developed questions, members of the DEL RPP view these as growing from policy concerns, with core descriptive information needed by DDOE partners and expanding in complexity to provide more diagnostic information to drive action and ultimately posing questions that contribute to the broader field, leveraging researchers' skills as needed. In fact, we added a researcher to the team when policy needs exceeded the research team's expertise.

Although we did not engage in a separate exercise, our collective prior experience tells us that a researcher-driven set of questions (even from our engaged scholars) may have centered the expertise (content and methods) of research team members, which would later be adapted to be more policy relevant. This may still be a valuable proposal for joint work but would unlikely yield the most meaningful outcomes for both partners.

Working and Learning Together

To ensure continued equitable relationships and engagement as the driver for the RPP, the implementation team continued to meet between full team meetings (i.e., the implementation team, DDOE leadership team, and our research team), to plan meeting agendas, and determine facilitation tactics that would encourage participation and engagement from everyone in the partnership. We considered *when* meetings were held and prioritized scheduling around those with the least flexibility. Further, our meetings were held over Zoom, which enabled several asynchronous and synchronous collaborative opportunities. In addition, we utilized tools like a shared Google Drive and Padlets to support online collaboration.

The RPP team also realizes the opportunity to learn from each other. In part, this reflects requirements of the grant proposal (e.g., capacity building) but also emerged organically through conversations since the grant was submitted. The notion of learning from each other itself is premised on equity—researchers were not positioned as experts, for example, or DDOE partners positioned as lacking knowledge. Rather, the team identified areas where they felt partners could help them to grow as well as areas in which partners felt they could *learn together*. In our grant proposal we conceptualized these as a series of casual working lunches (lunch and learns) and, in more recent conversations, simply working meetings to unpack topics of mutual interest. These topics included:

- Communicating about research
- Understanding of policy processes and research characteristics that partners value
- Reporting requirements of recently passed literacy legislation
- Establishing a model for future research partnerships
- Enhancing analytical capacity and addressing barriers to data use

Ensuring continued equity as we enact our capacity-building plan will require our facilitation team to continue establishing routines and processes that promote equitable participation in our meetings. The implementation team sees this as an opportunity to actively facilitate in ways that address knowledge hierarchies between research and practice partners and deepen our partnership.

Committing Effort to Partnership Work

Transparency is important in all relationships, but transparency about the real costs of RPP work can promote greater equity and trust within RPPs. For the DEL RPP, these issues emerged in the preparation of the grant proposal for external funds. The implementation team had familiarity with power dynamics of funding in RPPs (e.g., Rivera & Chun, 2023) and was very intentional in handling potential grant funding with great transparency. Funding nearly always goes to a research institution, and so goes control of those funds. This is sometimes—as in this instance—complicated by the fact that government agencies may not be able to accept funds to cover staff time for already fully funded state employees. The RPP collaboratively brainstormed ways we could ensure funds supported DDOE work but did not create bureaucratic entanglements for the agency. One solution was to fund additional staff time through a summer fellows program which added human capacity to support the literacy team’s work but wasn’t tied to departmental budgets.

Unfortunately, the DEL RPP failed to secure external funding,¹ which dampened spirits but not intentions. It did, however, require frank conversations about continued commitments of effort, which prior transparency made easier. For example, DDOE staff identified internal funds that could be used to support next steps for researchers, while UD faculty identified activities they could engage in at no cost that would support DDOE work. At this point, (unfunded) commitments of time and effort have been equitable, with no one partner bearing the greater burden. However, as we engage in RPP work, we need to further attend to transparency in the effort partnership members do, can, and should dedicate to this work. This is true with external funding but also in its absence. DDOE partners believe that the work of the RPP is in alignment with work they would be doing without the partnership, and the intent is for UD partners to be added capacity for this work. At the same time, RPP work is not clearly part of their job description, and, if funds were available, staff are not able to “buy out” time for this project. Therefore, it becomes critically important that this project not overextend their time and become a burden but also for them to make time commitments to continuing this work. Similar tensions are experienced with the research team. Because the university and the faculty members of the RPP are eager to develop partnerships with DDOE, the research team has identified ways it can continue to advance the RPP even though it is unfunded and does not clearly fall within their current workloads.

ADDRESSING EQUITY IN PARTNERSHIP WORK

To this point we have shared *why* we partnered and *how* we have partnered. Here we turn to the content of the partnership work. Described earlier, the members

of the team collaboratively identified a set of research priorities and corresponding research, policy, and practice questions to guide their work. Importantly, all center on equitable literacy practices and outcomes:

Research Priority #1: Create a statewide integrated dataset and common metric capturing K-3 early literacy assessment data that allows for a more comprehensive understanding of literacy development and performance across schools, districts, and communities.

Research Priority #2: To build a nuanced understanding of factors influencing unequal early literacy outcomes and to identify students' academic strengths and needs in early elementary school literacy achievement in Delaware.

Research Priority #3: To understand and improve how educators use assessment data to inform and adapt their instruction to address potential bases of inequality to meet the needs of all students better.

Research Priority #4: To assess and strengthen alignment among policy, assessment, and instruction with state literacy standards and across school districts to reduce inequality in early literacy outcomes.

In the following, we elaborate on the language and conceptualization of equity in the project goals and methods.

Leveraging Shared Commitments to Equity

A strength of the DEL RPP team is that members share a commitment to equity but in different, complementary ways. While all are concerned with promoting more equitable opportunities and outcomes, DDOE partners bring the lens of equity in the context of policies and practices, research partners are able to center on equity in research approach and findings, and the implementation partners bring support for equity within the partnership itself.

DDOE's mission is concerned with meeting the needs of all students, as their mission is "to empower every learner with the highest quality education through shared leadership, innovative practices and exemplary services." In team discussions about equity, the DDOE team shared concerns about inequitable adoption of and therefore access to HQIM, differential access to teachers with professional learning experiences aligned to the Science of Reading, and instructional practices that provide appropriate interventions that help all children read by grade 3. These are consistent with policy levers available to the department for promoting equitable outcomes. The research team was interested in questions and methods that surface school and system-based factors that contribute to unequal literacy outcomes noted earlier, seeking to provide evidence of inequitable practices and of promising strategies for mitigating inequity. The implementation team works to keep equity at the center of the joint work, as it is easy to slip into questions of

best practice in literacy or current education policy, and to ensure that equity in process—in RPP goal setting, work, and benefit—was maintained. Moving forward, the team acknowledges that honoring equity in each of these ways requires careful planning and attention in each aspect of our work.

Conceptualizing Educational Equity in Research Priorities

To conceptualize educational equity in our project, a natural starting point was exploring demographic inequalities in early literacy outcomes in grade 3. This information was available for us due to statewide accountability testing to use as a guide for initial conversations. However, when pushed to articulate theories about equity in early literacy and how joint work would specifically address inequality, the team collectively struggled to articulate a theory of action, perhaps reflecting a lack of deeper shared understanding. As an example, the team agreed that differential access to HQIM resulting from decentralized curriculum adoption was a potential equity issue. However, in theorizing why it might result in different levels of performance between white students and students of color within the same school, the team struggled to arrive at a common understanding, revealing different ideas about what potential sources of inequity might be at play and what strategies might be appropriate to address them. Through these conversations, our team shifted from conceptualizing inequality in literacy outcomes to surfacing structural and systemic inequities within the education system, agreeing on the importance of empirically exploring these issues in forthcoming work. Therefore, this shift informed our research priorities, which do not emphasize identification but instead reflect the need to understand *sources* of inequality.

As Trujillo and colleagues (2016) note, one of the ways educational policies can respond to inequality is to address inequitable access to what they describe as “robust learning environments,” which include considerations related to segregation and tracking, biases about capabilities and low expectations, and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction. Our research agenda is intended to identify such inequities, and address them through the provision of tailored supports, such as professional development for teachers and leaders and other supports for the implementation of high-quality (including culturally responsive, per DDOE’s framework) curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, the tailoring of supports addresses another policy inadequacy: the provision of universal solutions for contextually specific problems (Trujillo et al., 2016). Noted in various parts of our proposal, Delaware has a highly diverse student population and equally diverse communities in which students and schools are situated, from rural, migrant, and multilingual communities to economically disadvantaged urban communities. Research findings from the DEL RPP will help us to better understand complex conditions that shape literacy instruction and outcomes and permit the development or selection of locally relevant supports.

Creating a Shared Language of Equity

To this point, the team's shared language around equity has enabled us to jointly recognize unequal outcomes and discuss likely inequities leading to those outcomes—such as those featured in our priorities (e.g., inequitable systems and practices in early literacy). Yet what we collectively envision for equity in early literacy—that is, what can be accomplished in priority 3—has not been defined concretely in our project and, as we've learned, is the necessary next step to advancing our work. In reflecting on our next steps, our team recognized that developing a shared language for equity in early literacy and a theory of change is important not only for enacting the research agenda but for translating findings into strategies and practices that address inequality.

Notably, addressing educational inequity is a challenging partnership focus in general but is particularly challenging if there isn't a strong, trusting, and equitable partnership in place first. In other words, it is difficult to talk openly about issues of equity and inequities within the education system without some degree of vulnerability and openness. Because of our success in building equitable relationships in the ways described previously, our team is better positioned to tackle challenging issues of equity in early literacy outcomes. As a next step for the DEL RPP, the implementation team has tailored activities from an equity-focused toolkit (Samari & Schmitz, 2023) to support the team in defining early literacy equity and determine actions our partners can take based on potential findings to address inequities we uncover.

REFLECTIONS ON EQUITY, RPPs, AND THE FUTURE OF THE DEL RPP

Reflecting on the partnership—its development, ways of working, and projects—we wrap up this chapter by describing strengths and lingering challenges for achieving and sustaining equity in our work. One foundational asset to the RPP involves shared individual and institutional commitments to equity. All members of the team as individuals expressed strong equity commitments in this and their prior work as educators, leaders, advocates, and scholars. Further, the DDOE unit in which RPP members are housed is responsible for meeting the needs of *all* learners, and DDOE itself has explicit commitments to improving equitable opportunities (e.g., access to high quality teachers, culturally responsive pedagogy) and outcomes (e.g., college and career readiness). The College of Education and Human Development in which the research team is housed has explicit commitments to addressing challenges that impact historically marginalized communities. While there are still opportunities to develop and deepen our understanding of and vision for equity (described previously and subsequently), these shared commitments enabled the team to readily identify goals for their

work and to have institutional support for collaboration. While the notion of shared individual and institutional commitments to equity seems simple and perhaps obvious, at the point at which we write this chapter, public acknowledgment of such commitments has wavered, even waned, under political pressure, and many initiatives seeking to redress social injustice have been repealed. Gratefully, Delaware, at the time this chapter is being written, had not experienced such contentious discourse, and support for continued work to address critically important inequities in early literacy has not wavered since its inception, and that, we think, is noteworthy in the successes of our RPP to date.

Another lever for equity was the design of the team itself. In particular, we note that the presence of what we call an “implementation team” that was neither doing the research nor engaging in policy or practice allowed for attention to equity in the RPP process. The implementation team brought knowledge of team and power dynamics, historical hierarchies of knowledge, and research practice partnerships. This knowledge proved useful in navigating working relationships and fostering equitable collaboration in RPP work, such as the establishment of research priorities and the development of a grant proposal. Of course, research, policy, and practice partners also have expertise and experience in collaboration, but having an implementation team to support that work created space for them to focus on other aspects of partnership work. The presence of an implementation team was made possible by broader UD investment in engaged scholarship, as a land, sea, and space grant institution,² again representing institutional commitments to equity.

Another factor shaping equity in the RPP was the opportunity for external funding. The grant proposal was a catalyst for advancing the work beyond early conversations about shared interests in and concerns about early literacy. It provided an initial goal for collaboration, and the requirement to focus RPP work on educational inequity helped to continuously center conversations on equity. Although the funding was not secured, its contribution to the institutionalization of the RPP and direction of its work is evident and represents an important lesson for how funders can drive equity-centered RPPs.

While we are able to point to some important successes with respect to centering equity in the DEL RPP, our team nonetheless has experienced and continues to wrestle with tensions and challenges in the work. First and foremost, we must deepen our collective understanding and vision for equity in this work. We have used the language of equity in important but partial ways, and to truly achieve our priorities and goals, we must grapple with equity issues more explicitly. This includes talking openly about the assumptions underlying our joint work; exploring the structural inequities in our systems and policies; thinking critically about how to enact the research agenda, including how we will make sense of findings; and developing a research-informed plan for redressing those inequities. Equity

work is challenging and requires vulnerability, risk-taking, and humility, but the work of establishing the DEL RPP as an equity-centered partnership has created a firm foundation for moving forward.

Relatedly, we have identified broader stakeholder engagement as an area for improvement. Although the process of building a team was inclusive in some ways, we did not broaden participation to include those most impacted by—and therefore those most invested in—the work. This includes teachers, leaders, children, and families. We attribute this omission to our collective lack of experience developing an RPP and the early establishment of a grant proposal as partnership work, which shaped the focus and pace of work. A more equitable approach—which we hope to embrace in the future, beginning with stakeholder mapping and other activities—would not merely center work on issues of equity but center those affected by inequity and elevate their voices in understanding the problem, setting the agenda, designing the research, and developing solutions.

A last issue worthy of reflection is the capacity for partnership work in the absence of funding. We noted earlier individual and institutional commitments to equity work, but these may be necessary though not sufficient. Substantial time and effort are required to both build relationships, develop agendas, and enact plans—needs well documented in the literature on RPPs. The DEL RPP set agendas and priorities for work that assumed the financial support that enables time and effort to be dedicated. In the absence of funding, the team got creative on what it could accomplish as it pursued other options. While this creativity has reaffirmed our intentions to partner and led to some interesting and unplanned work, much of the work needed to achieve our goals will be dictated by the demands of competing obligations. This not only puts at risk the work itself but may create tension within the partnership, as capacity for continuing the work may not be equitably distributed. For example, without external funding, faculty researchers may be unable to allocate time and assign other tasks (e.g., teaching), whereas DDOE staff are charged with improving early literacy, whether through the partnership or not.

CONCLUSION

The DEL RPP represents a new chapter in a long-standing relationship between UD and DDOE. It leverages the team's collective research and policy knowledge and experience to support goals for strengthening early literacy instruction and outcomes for all students. As described throughout this chapter, the partnership was founded on principles of equity in both outcome (research and policy) and process (the partnership itself). Yet the DEL RPP is learning while growing. It was founded on common concerns for early literacy outcomes in Delaware and shared recognition of inequality in those outcomes. As a partnership, we are still learning

about what equity means in the context of early literacy. And we are still evolving as a partnership, learning from each interaction, success, and failure. As we write this chapter, we continue to work on all aspects of the partnership, with the firm belief that this authentic and deliberate collaboration will enable us as partners to achieve shared goals to produce and use locally relevant research evidence to meet the needs of the diverse learners and communities of Delaware more effectively.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter emphasized the importance of establishing shared language and honoring the time and perspectives of partners in executing research projects within an RPP. In particular, it touched on the *shared language of equity* component of the framework. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. What strategies should RPPs use when key voices related to a topic (e.g., early childhood literacy) are difficult to bring to the table?
2. How does co-constructing the research design (e.g., research question development) with practice partners help to facilitate equity-focused research within an RPP? How is this different from traditional forms of academic research?
3. How are the goals and approaches of an RPP with a state-level organization different from those in a more localized setting (e.g., with one or more school districts)?
4. How should considerations of time and bandwidth be weighed for both research and practice partners within an RPP? How are those considerations informed by the funding structure of an RPP?
5. How and when should an RPP establish shared language around equity, and what sources should be considered?
6. What is the responsibility of RPPs to engage in equity-focused research in state or community contexts where it is politically expedient to do so? Do those responsibilities change in states where it is less so? What additional steps or considerations might need to be made when the politics are less supportive of the research?

NOTES

- 1 Since the writing of this article, the RPP has successfully secured external funding from the William T. Grant Institutional Challenge Grant program to enact its research priorities.
- 2 These designations mean that the university is involved in scientific research, education, training, and extension projects geared toward the conservation and practical use of these resources.

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Navigating and Transforming PK12 Systems Through Research-Practice Partnerships

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The research-practice partnership (RPP) approach in education is one that inherently redistributes relational power within education research initiatives by undoing the implied and materially enforced hierarchies of academia (Farrell et al, 2021). Attending to the power dynamics within RPP teams requires intentionality both in recognizing and in shifting away from a “traditional” position of academic researchers as rarefied sources and arbiters of knowledge. Valuing the practice-based and experiential knowledge and expertise of educators, students, and families provides a richer understanding of data and allows RPPs to ask and answer the right questions. In this way, RPPs are particularly able to study, address, and impact inequities that exist within their schools across gendered, racial, and socioeconomic lines for students as well as for the educators and families within the partner learning communities. These learning communities exist both within a broader sociopolitical context and also within complex and often overlapping PK12 systems made up of federal, state, and local district policies; district and school building instructional infrastructure; and professional culture, all of which shape and intersect with our work.

RPP practitioners interested in supporting more equitable education outcomes must contend with these cultures and systems of policy and practice, many of which exist beyond the purview of the RPP initiatives we pursue. PK12 systems, policies, culture, and their material impacts may be viewed as contextual factors, barriers, and/or facilitators of change that must be taken into account when designing and implementing research projects and interventions. However, these systems may not just be factors to take into consideration but rather key levers and sites of change. In this chapter, we present how one RPP initiative addressed the real and perceived controllability of these factors from the perspective that engagement in the boundary-blurring, power-shifting RPP processes

can, and should, be transformative across PK12 systems toward greater equity and democratization for all involved.

RPP CONTEXT

This work took place within the context of a mid-western RPP situated within a university (pseudonym Research Partnership for School Transformation—RPST) focused on connecting research and practice to build capacity for school transformation through collaborative inquiry and professional learning. The RPST was founded in the 1980s by a biologist interested in connecting with local public school students and teachers to further joyful science learning. Over time, the RPST developed as a home for university-wide PK12 education programming including the development of STEM curricular materials, professional learning programs, and several long-term RPPs. Across these programs, the RPST approaches schools as partners with expertise and deep knowledge. The RPST harnesses the collective wisdom and commitment of both the university and the PK12 practitioners to transform education experiences. Acknowledging that higher educational institutions have had a long history of imparting knowledge, the RPST instead works with school partners and “gets into the weeds” to understand the root causes of persistent challenges and systemic inequities. The RPST uses a human-centered approach to motivate change, track progress, and inform policy and practice through engagement with research. The RPST model of partnership organically and flexibly varies according to partners’ needs and contexts to develop practitioner-led, problem-focused collaborative research with an emphasis on supporting and studying the implementation of research-based practices at scale.

One RPST program was originally conceptualized as a school culture and leadership professional learning program that provided contracted services to schools and districts. This program was designed to build cultural capacity and opportunities for deeper learning through consultation, coaching, and professional development without a research aim or focus. This chapter explores how a research-practice partnership organically developed through this professional learning program to navigate and address complex PK12 systems. Through this case study, we explore how an RPP can be used to re-imagine and transform PK12 systems by attending to system-level factors to achieve more equitable schools and communities.

BACKGROUND AND HOW IT ALL CAME TO BE

In 2007, an urban district in the Midwest lost its accreditation, and the school board disbanded in favor of a state control board. In 2008, the district hired a new superintendent—their seventh in five years—with the goal of regaining

accreditation and local school board control. At that time, the district served 35,000 students and had significant debt. Under the guidance of this superintendent, the district gained accreditation during the 2016–2017 school year and regained local control in the spring of 2019 with the election of a new school board.

Over the course of the 2010s, enrollment in the school district dropped dramatically to less than 20,000 students. While the city population is evenly divided between white and Black or African American residents (42% respectively), the public school district serves a primarily Black or African American student population (75%). The district comprises 45 elementary schools, of which 41 receive schoolwide Title I funding. During this time period, many charter schools and networks opened within the district's footprint, adding both political and financial pressure.

In order to support school autonomy and to provide a testing ground for innovation, the district began piloting a novel governance structure for the 2019–2020 school year. This structure was modeled on the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP, n.d.) and created a new nonprofit school governance network organization in partnership with a local community foundation. The nonprofit governance network board originally consisted of five members, two mayoral appointees, two members of the school board, and the district superintendent, and employed an executive director. The executive director of this nonprofit served as a member of the superintendent's cabinet alongside assistant superintendents and was responsible for instructional leadership in participating schools. Two elementary schools were selected by the school board to participate in the governance pilot due to being the two lowest-performing schools within the district, both situated in high-poverty urban neighborhoods and serving a 97% Black or African American student population. The district enacted this pilot independently prior to partnering with the RPST.

The newly created school governance network partnered with the RPST to provide school culture and leadership consultation and professional development programming for the two constituent elementary schools. The work began with the co-development of deep learning projects to serve as a site for program activities. The RPST professional learning team aimed to facilitate teacher and administrator work on these projects, providing direct implementation, coordination, and professional development to build capacity for pedagogy, instruction, and leadership. Prior iterations of the program included deep learning projects such as implementing school staffing models to create hybrid administrator-teacher roles, facilities and classroom decoration initiatives, and implementation of social-emotional learning curricular enhancements. During the first half of the 2019–2020 school year, the RPST professional learning team met with the nonprofit governance network executive director, school principals, and instructional coaches to co-design an initial project and select teacher-leader participants. Teacher leaders were selected

based on tenure and interest to include one teacher from each grade level, kindergarten through fifth. Once the initial project and teacher leader team were identified, the program began in earnest.

The initial project, chosen by school administrators and the governance network executive director, was to build a school culture of deeper learning through providing instructional support and capacity building around project-based learning (PBLWorks, n.d.) in merging science and social studies into “inquiry blocks.” This project was initially selected without teacher input; however, in the early stages of forming the teacher leader team, these participants further narrowed the scope to focus specifically on place-based learning within their neighborhoods. The RPST team provided teacher professional development sessions and leadership coaching and facilitated professional learning communities (PLCs) for the schools. The RPST also facilitated the formation of the teacher leader team and provided funding support for curricular materials and teacher stipends. These professional learning activities began in the spring of 2020 and continued throughout the duration of the project.

BECOMING AN RPP AND CO-DESIGNING THE THEORY OF ACTION

Over the course of four years, the project shifted from one of service delivery and support to an RPP focused on changing school leadership and instructional culture. As originally planned, the program contracted with an external evaluation firm to support accountability and reporting to stakeholders. This firm was located on the West Coast and engaged in outcomes evaluation, surveying participants twice a year and providing an annual report. As the program team worked with school partners to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, their relationships deepened through more frequent meetings, and their interest in engaging more intentionally with research grew. In the fall of 2021, the governance network executive director, school administrators, teacher leaders, and the RPST professional learning team coalesced into a single program leadership group and invited RPST research and evaluation staff to participate in program meetings. Through the sharing of ideas and feedback, researchers and educators found that they had organically embarked on a research-practice partnership to better understand and navigate the complex political and systems-level context.

Researchers and educators worked together as thought partners to fully co-design the programmatic theory of action. Through this process, participants built a shared understanding of school resilience, and—through that—a more democratized approach to both research and practice. They co-defined and implemented an authentic culture of distributed leadership, collective aspiration, and nested patterns of equitable collaboration necessary for deeper learning (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). This theory of action describes how in the context

of a partnership of teachers and administrators with external facilitators and researchers, these teams co-developed and implemented deeper learning projects and, through those projects, were able to bolster the schools' learning cultures. Instrumental in this process were the material supports provided through the RPP, including curricular materials, targeted leadership coaching, facilitation of teacher collaboration, funding for teacher leadership work, and targeted data feedback. The theory posits that by adding these supports, we create shifts in how leadership shows up in schools, shifting school culture and building individual teacher and leader capacities for deeper learning. This new leadership mindset leads to positive changes in classroom instruction and student learning. Additionally, we found evidence of a positive feedback loop, with shifts in teachers' attitudes and skills leading to greater student engagement and achievement, in turn leading to renewed teacher excitement for their profession, further amplifying their commitment to the work.

Throughout the project, major outcomes included:

- Developing and implementing science and social studies PBL curriculum materials
- Increasing teacher collaboration and cohesion within and across the two schools
- Creating meaningful teacher leadership roles and structures, and
- Increasing student achievement on state standardized tests.

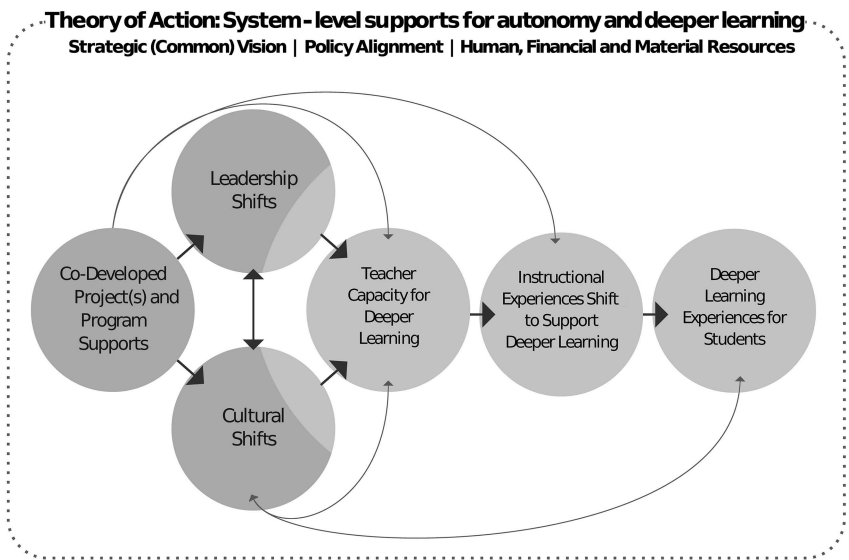


Figure 13.1 Final Co-Designed Theory of Action

EQUITABLE RPP RELATIONSHIPS AND PK12 SYSTEMS

A key feature of this project was the initial decision to build equitable, working relationships at multiple levels of the research, PK12, and community systems. The RPST professional learning team and research staff developed relationships with district central office administrators, external funders, and governance network staff in addition to working with school administrators and teachers. University researchers were initially engaged to enhance evaluation services, but due in part to the complex sociopolitical realities, researchers were invited by the practitioners to engage more closely in programming to better answer questions of practice and engage in transformational design. The RPST research team participated as a thought partners, collected and analyzed data, conducted literature reviews, and supported fundraising efforts in addition to considering larger research questions around the theory of action and community resilience.

In considering RPP equity, researchers can easily center themselves and their power dynamics with practitioners, but it is crucial to attend to the power dynamics and relationship equity across practitioner groups within partnership work. Tensions often exist between teachers and administrators; between central office and school building staff; and between community partners, funders, and program staff. As researchers who were invited into the practice space, we were able to leverage our “outsider” status to support more equitable distribution of voice in decision-making and goal-setting by lifting up the role of PK12 systems as barriers and facilitators to school improvement. This took many forms throughout the project, including more mundane examples such as how teachers took the lead on defining their understanding of resilience and leadership and the ways that teacher feedback was used to advocate for increased funding for stipends. In more striking moments, the presence of outside researchers allowed the team to address unprofessional behaviors on the part of program staff, which led to personnel changes. When sitting at a table with district and building administrators, teacher leaders, community partners, and funders, researchers have an opportunity to use their privileged position to center and prioritize the voices of teachers, students, and their families for system-level change.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP FOR MORE EQUITABLE SYSTEMS

The RPST approaches schools as multigenerational learning spaces where deeper learning is possible for students through nested patterns of collaboration, leadership, and mindset. The RPST works with administrators and teachers in the ways that we want them to work with each other and with students. RPST posits that a student growth mindset, ability to work together to solve complex problems, and learning is a function of their interactions with each other and with

school staff. Concurrently, teacher growth mindset, collaboration, and professional learning are nested within their interactions with administrators and school policies. These in turn are dependent on those administrators' interactions with each other, with those policies, and with the creation of those policies. These interactions reinforce each other and beget school culture such that a pattern of respectful, empathetic cooperation and willingness to uplift and build upon the ideas and leadership of others becomes the norm. Building systems of distributed leadership through teacher leadership was a primary focus area for the governance network toward a nested pattern of autonomy for the schools, teachers, and students (Choi et al., 2016; Spillane et al., 2001; Whitworth & Chiu, 2015). This approach builds on theories of distributed leadership in schools as a framework for intervening in inequitable systems within the broader structural dynamics of race, gender, and class in leadership and power (Diamond, 2013).

In the early stages of the partnership, program staff facilitated network leadership meetings with building-level administrators and teacher leaders from both schools. School and governance network administrators as well as teacher leaders received leadership training and professional development in project-based learning. As the project unfolded, the teacher leadership team took the lead in developing the PBL curriculum with their grade-level peers and in providing professional development and peer coaching in their schools. Researchers were invited to observe these meetings and to provide data back to the leadership team for participatory analysis and sense making.

As the project progressed, this team of teacher leaders took on the direction of the program and the research. Teachers on the leadership team dictated and led program activities, including teacher professional development opportunities, peer coaching, parent engagement, the introduction of morning meetings and student-led conferences, as well as finding and sharing professional leadership opportunities with their peers. These shifts also allowed the RPP to develop insights that both furthered the project and resulted in the development of a framework for teacher community resilience (Arney & Elkana, 2024). By the end of the project, at the behest of the leadership team, the governance network reorganized its formal structure and by-laws, removing mayoral appointees from their board of directors in favor of teachers from each school and a representative from the teachers' union. Directly addressing the inequitable power dynamics within schools and working to change the structures that reinforced those inequities was both an outcome and enabling condition of success for the program.

PK12 SYSTEMS AS MATERIAL REALITY

Systems of policies and culture often hinge on material realities such as community context, funding/budgeting, daily schedules, and physical space within a school, but these realities may not be as fixed as they appear. When living and

working within overlapping systems of inequity, there are many material realities that we cannot and may never be able to shift within our locus of control. In this project, participants were asked “what would it look like if we permitted ourselves to imagine that we could change them?”

From that wondering, RPST was able to leverage university resources as well as those of private funders to overcome barriers. For example, by paying teacher stipends for professional development attendance and for leadership team activities, RPST was able to sidestep very real contractual impediments while also honoring teachers as professionals whose time is valuable. Similarly, the use of external RPST funds supported leadership teams in aligning their budgets with their instruction, such as a case where rakes and shovels for student gardens could be purchased outside of the mandated category of “facilities maintenance” in the school budget. These external resources also allowed the schools to create and furnish a STEM lab in one school, provided materials for hands-on science and social studies learning and funds for field trips. When considering equity in education, access to joyful learning often hinges on the larger inequitable distribution of wealth and resources within society. For schools in high-poverty areas, these inequities are further exacerbated by greater social-emotional needs of students. For these two elementary school communities, the statistics are grim (Surgo Ventures, n.d.):

- One third of the population living below the poverty line in both zip codes
- 12.5% and 20.5% of adults living with a disability in respective census tracts
- Crime rates at over three and four times the national average in respective census tracts
- High infection and death rates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These statistics translate to extremely low student attendance rates, with 35% and 33% of students respectively attending at least 90% of the time during the 2021–2022 school year and high student mobility rates (School Mobility & Attendance, 2021). Neither of these schools employed social workers, and teachers regularly reported high levels of stress and concern for their students. However, by providing teachers with paid collaboration time, resources, and coordination support, they engaged students in joyful learning. Students explored their neighborhood’s jazz history, learned how erosion shaped their street grid, lobbied local governments on light pollution, and built community gardens. These learning opportunities did not change the fundamentally inequitable context, but they did bring teachers and students together in the type of meaningful learning that would not otherwise have been possible at that scale.

In addition to the financial resources afforded by the RPP, literature reviews and leadership conversations between teachers, administrators, program staff, and researchers led both schools to rearrange their daily schedules adding morning

classroom meetings and inquiry blocks as well as making space for more frequent grade level PLC work. Increased teacher-centered collaboration and specifically principal leadership that supports teacher collaboration have extensive research showing how these are associated with higher collective and self-efficacy within schools (Goddard et al., 2015), improved instructional practices (Kane & Rosenquist, 2019), and increased student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Akiba & Liang, 2016; Goddard et al., 2017). Teachers in both schools attributed the gains their students experienced on standardized tests to the increased student engagement with intentional, comprehensive, project-based lessons which were made possible through the increased collaboration and planning time.

The RPP approach also allowed the team to bring in community partners who could provide meeting and professional learning space as well as consultation and support for programming such as graphic design services for the development of parent-facing materials. Teachers reported that holding professional development sessions in clean, well-stocked, coworking spaces that had been donated by community partners through the RPP made them feel appreciated and respected as professionals. Through engaging with best-practice research, the teacher leadership teams also drove changes in how the schools conducted Meet the Teacher nights and introduced student-led parent-teacher conferences. Parents received professionally produced grade-level booklets detailing the schools' missions, what their child would be learning, and how they as parents could best engage with the school. Both schools noted higher levels of parent involvement and engagement throughout the school year and the highest levels of parent attendance at parent-teacher conferences than ever before. These in-kind resources coordinated through the context of the RPP helped educators create a welcoming learning environment and materially demonstrated that teachers and parents were valued members of the learning community. While these examples are specific to the RPST partnership, they demonstrate how RPPs can serve as a means for expanding resources necessary for meeting the goals of the practice organization.

SOCIOPOLITICAL REALITIES

Concurrent with these successes, the superintendent of the school district who had championed the governance network and increased school autonomy retired, and a new superintendent joined the district. This new superintendent brought a deep distrust of RPP work and university partnerships more broadly. Within the first two months of the school year, one of the elementary principals chose to leave education, and by December, the governance network was dissolved. Both program and research staff were barred from further contact with school staff, ending the project. By July of the following year, this new

superintendent had been placed on administrative leave amid accusations of financial mismanagement.

This project did not ultimately change the broader sociopolitical landscape within the district, yet participant educators, researchers, and program staff were able to intervene on building policies and professional cultures toward more equitable outcomes for staff and students. Through this broad partnership, school principals had the tools and opportunities to work with teachers toward concrete solutions to better serve students and co-create a culture of respect and learning for themselves and their students. Program leaders produced practice briefs using their findings to support teacher empowerment in other contexts and shared their work at regional and national conferences. The novel governance structure provided space for these schools to engage in leadership programming and the ability to transform that professional learning into an RPP project; however, it was ultimately a weakness. While RPP staff had some engagement with the broader district administration such as providing reports and presentations, the relationship never fully translated beyond the confines of the governance network. The two major findings of this RPP have been:

- Through long-term, coordinated action, we can shift school culture and shape school systems that provide more equitable learning spaces for students and working spaces for teachers.
- Sustainability must go beyond the school and funding structures to take into account the broader political landscape of the district and state, focusing on relationship-building and vision alignment at every level.

CONCLUSION

While this project evolved over time in terms of its specific goals and approach to research, it followed the RPP principles of long-term collaboration focused on equitable educational transformation through engagement in research, intentional organization, and power-shifting within the research activities (Farrell et al., 2021). Within this project, participants were able to leverage the resources and tools of the research endeavors to not just study, critique, and account for the ways their PK12 systems and policies perpetuate inequities, but also to directly intervene on those systems. Teachers gained power in both the governance and leadership of their schools and took advantage of resources to provide higher-quality learning experiences that celebrated their students' communities. As teachers reported higher job satisfaction, parent engagement increased and student academic achievement grew. The constraints imposed on schools and RPPs have real, material consequences that can set the ceiling on potential improvements, but those ceilings can be moved.

A given RPP cannot be expected to solve every piece of a PK12 system or the broader cultural and economic realities that create and preserve inequitable outcomes for students. However, without addressing those systems, we cannot hope to create meaningful or lasting change. Through deep, real partnerships that allow for vulnerable, honest relationships, RPPs have the potential to uncover the root of systems problems and provide the space, safety, and support for cross-role creativity. When we attend to those peripheral PK12 systems such as physical space, materials, scheduling, budgets, and governance, we can find methods to change or circumvent the ways that these systems reinforce inequitable access and outcomes for students and teachers. A PK12 system factor may not be within the original purview of the RPP, but that should not stop RPP participants from imagining the ways that those factors could change. Change begins with the belief that you have the ability to control the outcomes; if we say that a PK12 system is within our locus of control, then maybe it is.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This chapter focused on how an RPP can help support participants and partners who are navigating challenges within their PK-12 school systems while supporting equitable teaching and learning outcomes. In particular, it touched on the contextual elements of the framework, as well as the *equitable RPP relationships* and *equity in methods* components. Based on the case study that the authors shared, please consider the following questions for discussion.

1. How does the concept of locus of control among participants in research-practice partnerships influence their ability to address systemic inequities in PK12 education? What examples from the chapter illustrate this dynamic?
2. In what ways do PK12 system factors act as barriers or facilitators to achieving equitable outcomes in the context of the RPP discussed in the chapter? How can partners effectively identify and navigate these factors?
3. What specific strategies did the RPP employ to foster cultural transformation within the urban school district? How do these strategies contribute to building more equitable relationships among university researchers, school leaders, and community organizations?
4. How do RPPs manage to blur the boundaries within PK12 systems? What implications does this have for the sustainability of their initiatives and the impacts on teaching and learning outcomes?
5. How can the practice-centered knowledge generated through RPP projects be utilized to influence policy and practice beyond the scope of the partnership? What are the potential challenges in disseminating this knowledge to a broader audience?

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Part 3

Final Thoughts



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Emboldening Present and Future RPP Leaders

Pursuing Equity in Politically Charged Times

*Hillary Parkhouse, Jesse Senechal,
and David Naff*

The choice of the word “navigating” for the title of this book is meant to convey that there are no simple solutions for the tensions that arise when research-practice partnerships (RPPs) engage in equity work. Partnerships must continually gauge and adapt to the ever-shifting sociopolitical landscape. This is especially true in the realm of equity work, where the terrain is currently changing at break-neck speed. Though some may wish to believe schools can avoid these questions through remaining politically neutral, the reality is that education is inherently political. Research is also political. The choices of what to study, how, and with whom are shaped by political dynamics and choices about which types of research to fund. University-based research comes with its own set of political considerations (e.g., tenure and promotion policies), particularly if it is a public university dependent upon state dollars and overseen by a board of political appointees.

To *navigate* the multitude of issues involved in equity-focused RPP work means not to resolve but to steer one’s way through. Because every RPP is unique, there is no roadmap. Each RPP must find its own way, must make a series of decisions at every crossroads. The purpose of this book is to offer RPPs a framework and a collection of case studies that might help inform these decisions.

The framework presented in Chapter 1 illustrates the interactions between the five elements of equity-focused RPPs (relationships, project goals, topic, method, and shared language). Decisions regarding each of these elements exist within broader sociopolitical contexts that affect the interactions and decisions made throughout the lifespan of a project. Some recent contexts faced at the writing of this book include partisan hyperpolarization, efforts to dismantle public education, and the most coordinated campaign in US history to restrict classroom discussions on race, gender, and sexuality (Pollock et al., 2022; Vilavicencio et al., 2023).

It is these sociopolitical contexts that the authors in this volume have navigated while conducting their RPP work. Just as every RPP is unique, so too is every RPP's context. Local, state, and national contexts interact in complex ways, and these in turn interact with the institutional and personal dynamics within each partner organization. As a result, every RPP needs to map for itself the potential interactions within and across these various levels. We hope our framework and the questions embedded within it provide helpful starting points for such an analysis.

After completing this political landscape analysis, RPP leaders can better identify resonances with other RPPs navigating similar contexts, such as those described in this book. Even though each RPP case is unique, each case also offers lessons from which others might learn. It is for this reason we structured this book as a set of case studies. In reading these case studies ourselves, we invariably found multiple insights that we could apply to our own RPP work.

LESSONS LEARNED ACROSS CASES

As interest in RPP approaches to educational equity research is growing, our hope is that this set of insight-packed cases enriches the knowledge of present and future RPP leaders. In her recent Wallace Foundation Distinguished Lecture, Datnow (2024) issued this call to the RPP field:

If we are to shift the paradigm to engaged forms of research, in which researchers partner more closely with practitioners, policymakers, and community members to address equity issues in educational change, we will need to consider how we train future scholars.

Accordingly, one important goal of this book is to offer a resource that could be used to train graduate students, as well as early career researchers, in high-quality, equity-focused RPP work with K12 districts in our current sociopolitical climate. The knowledge and skills for this work go far beyond what is traditionally taught to researchers.

The next part of this chapter looks across cases presented in this volume to highlight lessons on the following important issues for current and future RPP scholars to consider:

- different motivations and institutional logics
- standards of evidence and research funding-related constraints
- hierarchies, power, and the human dimensions of partnerships
- timeline differences and pressures

Before delving into this list, we believe it is worth reiterating the important lessons offered by Ming and Dickson in Chapter 2 regarding the choice to use an RPP in the first place. Other chapters highlight the many ways that RPPs can support equity work through democratic and two-way relationships between researchers and practitioners. However, this does not mean that all equity-focused educational research should be conducted via an RPP. As Ming and Dickson point out, there are P-side costs, including opportunity costs, that researchers need to be sensitive to when proposing the idea of an RPP. Researchers should also keep in mind the reality that “managing complex participatory dynamics and producing high-quality research are different skills. In some cases, they may seem to function in opposition” (p. 26). Even if a team does ultimately decide an RPP is appropriate, remembering these considerations can help researchers bear in mind the P-side costs.

Considering Different Motivations and Institutional Logics

As Yamashiro and colleagues (2023) articulated:

RPPs exist in the liminal space between organizations or institutions with different, and sometimes competing or conflicting, goals and values, motivations and incentives, and climates and cultures—while simultaneously attempting to build trust and a set of shared goals and values and collaboration processes among partners.

(p. 10)

Districts and schools have very different institutional logics than research organizations and the academy. Whereas the former is primarily concerned with improving internal processes and outcomes, the latter is concerned with contributing to the external knowledge base and theory building. This translates to divergent ways of thinking and operating that can affect the ability for an RPP to conduct equity work (Meyer et al., 2023). Because districts are concerned with internal processes and are subject to accountability pressures from both their boards as well as the state and federal agencies, many tend to have a culture of privacy. This culture can constrain researchers’ ability to disseminate findings beyond the partner district(s), thus limiting the potential positive impacts such findings could have on both the field and other districts. Chapter 5 by Naff and colleagues presented one means of navigating the risks of publishing findings that might incur criticism of the districts, for instance, when studying topics like racial disproportionality in school discipline. The authors responded to this asymmetrical vulnerability for P-side partners by aggregating findings across multiple districts in subsequent projects to protect the anonymity of each district while still allowing districts to benefit from the recommendations.

When the R side is a federally funded regional education laboratory (REL) or a non-profit organization, the expectation for the R side to influence theory may not be as present as it is for university-based researchers (as Chapter 6 by Waldrop and colleagues illustrates). Chapter 4, by Varier and colleagues, showed that university-based researchers, too, can adopt as a guiding principle the idea of “research as service” to practitioners.

At the same time, we want to avoid treating theory-building and local impact as wholly distinct activities. The work of RPPs can enhance practitioners’ theoretical understanding of their practice settings, a development that rarely occurs within traditional research models wherein study findings are often disseminated in academic journals behind paywalls.

Institutional differences in goals and logics are not necessarily an impediment—they can also be an asset to partnerships. The differing values of the R side can broaden perspectives on the P side, as illustrated in Chapter 6 by Waldrop and colleagues. In that case, the R side encouraged the district to shift the focus from COVID-related “learning loss” to “bright spots”—schools across the district that were producing positive student outcomes in those challenging years. Similarly, Naff and colleagues called for taking asset-based approaches through acknowledging the progress already made by practitioners in their equity efforts. Partnering with researchers can also instill in practitioners a sense of prestige and commitment, as illustrated in the case from Coenraad and colleagues (Chapter 7).

Finally, some cases reminded us that the goals of the R side and P side are not the only ones to consider—perhaps most important should be the goals of the families served. In Chapter 10 by Tichnor-Wagner and colleagues, we saw how an RPP navigated challenges in engaging families who have historically been marginalized and felt unwelcome at school.

Considering Standards of Evidence and Research Funding-Related Constraints

Related to different institutional logics are different standards of evidence. Whereas much federally funded educational research prioritizes methodological designs that identify causal *relationships* (such as randomized control trial designs), practitioners may be more interested in understanding the causal *mechanisms* (i.e., how and why something is causing an outcome) and influence of various conditions on outcomes. Methodologies such as design-based implementation research may be more appropriate for the latter. Networking knowledge, as described in Chapter 9 by Oweyole and Arbogast and Chapter 10 by Tichnor-Wagner and colleagues, is one way to ensure practitioners obtain the on-the-ground type of knowledge they often need.

To center equity in method, the R side can use asset-based approaches to seek not only the causes of inequities but also evidence of progress the P side has

already made to address these (see the chapters by Naff and colleagues and Wal-drop and colleagues for examples). Oweyole and Arbogast's chapter reminded us to "honor the equity work taking place in educational settings before trying to build upon it" (p. 144).

Returning to Ming and Dickson's advice, if the R side is bound to certain standards of evidence or research designs that do not support the P side's pursuit of equity, then it may be that an RPP is not the right approach. At the same time, those committed to collaborative research are not accepting these current constraints as immutable. For example, the WT Grant Foundation's Institutional Challenge Grant includes as one goal that "research institutions will design a feasible strategy for institutional change that addresses observed structural, motivational, and financial barriers than inhibit research-practice partnerships at the institution" (2024). This might include, for example, university promotion and tenure policies that value impact on the local community—not just the broader field—and allow flexibility for the amount of time necessary to engage in partnership work. Additionally, other funding agencies are being encouraged by the RPP community to expand their definition of scientific standards of evidence (see, for example Meyer et al., 2023). If funding agencies broaden their requirements to include the types of research designs and evidence practitioners are most interested in, both the quality and quantity of RPP research could be enhanced. As described in Chapter 12 by Purinton and colleagues the absence of funding can negatively impact both the RPP equity work itself as well as the partner relationships.

Considering Hierarchies, Power, and the Human Dimension of Partnerships

Hierarchies came up frequently across these case studies. Traditionally, researchers have been positioned as the "experts" and thus enjoyed higher status and power in many ways than education practitioners, with one purpose of RPPs being to flatten that hierarchy. As described in Chapter 4 by Singer-Gabella and colleagues, the intentional building of equitable relationships can help practitioners feel their expertise is just as valid and valuable, if not more so, than that of researchers.

However, equity-focused RPPs must also consider how hierarchies *within* each partnering organization can hinder equity work. Both Chapter 13 by Elkana and colleagues and Chapter 6 by Waldrop and colleagues described how researchers in their RPP used their "outsider status" to elevate voices of teachers, students, and families in conversations with district leaders and bring knowledge from the "ground up" not just "top down" to create system-level change. Many of the chapters took up Ming and Dickson's call to go beyond "overly simplistic recommendations, such as building trust and open communication" to "openly

address sociocultural biases, to directly confront power asymmetries, to encourage mutual criticism of all knowledge claims, and to harness political conflict and informed dissent as a creative force” (p. 21).

Many of these cases also illustrate how to expand definitions of “researcher” in order to better honor the knowledge contributions of practitioners including teachers and caregivers. For example, Coenraad and colleagues explained that, after they realized teacher members of their team were interested not only in the content but also the methods of their survey study, they shifted their “facilitation to be more inviting of ‘researcher-type’ input from practitioners” leading their research team to expand “in capacity and richness of perspective” (p. 110). The RPP in Tichnor-Wagner and colleagues’ case didn’t just invite caregivers’ perspectives—they first ensured caregivers understood the language of improvement science so they could become more fully involved as co-producers of knowledge.

A throughline across these cases was the recognition that RPPs are not just partnerships of institutions—they’re first and foremost partnerships of *people*. As Peña and colleagues poignantly wrote, “RPPs are about human relationships.” To do equity work, RPPs must use humanizing practices that honor the equal dignity of all individuals, both those in all partnering institutions and those served by the partnership (e.g., families, students). In Chapter 8, Osai and colleagues describe their use of womanist principles to guide their anti-racist and humanizing practices, approaching “partnership with a focus on people, even as our efforts aim to address systemic educational challenges” (p. 125). These guiding principles included “communication, reciprocal respect, inclusion, steadiness, and progress” and were expressed by “centering joy through poetry, popular media, and mindfulness” (p. 130).

Peña and colleagues remind us of this orientation by regularly describing how their RPP work centered not just equity, but “*humanity and equity*.” In using the methodology of Pláticas, all partners removed titles and brought their whole selves in the newly created space:

We removed our theoretical frames of minds, emptied the contents of our individual baggage on the table so we could sift through it all and better understand one another as human beings first, then cultivate a space where our intentions in this work and our expected outcomes were better aligned.

(p. 177)

Finally, in Chapter 4, Varier and colleagues described the centrality of reflexivity (i.e., critical examination of one’s own judgments and practices and how these might influence the partnership) in guiding their RPP work across all five elements of the framework.

These cases reveal not only how power operates within and across partner institutions, but also importantly between sociopolitical contexts and those institutions. Each of the RPPs attempted to equalize power within their partnership while also working within (and in many ways, against) a political climate in which the already-powerful attempt to suppress growing movements for racial and social justice. The chapter by Varier and colleagues acknowledged the relative privilege of academic researchers to continue equity work while PK12 practitioners are forced to comply with restrictive state legislation. Researchers need to remain aware of this and the fact that practitioners may, as a result, not be able to employ all of the equity practices recommended by researchers. If researchers misattribute low uptake of equity practices to partner-side shortcomings rather than the sociopolitical forces working against equity, the partnership will suffer. Researchers must deeply understand the relevant policy constraints in order to make practice recommendations that are feasible given those limiting factors. They can further benefit practitioner partners by engaging in some types of policy advocacy that practitioners may not be as free to pursue.

Considering Timeline Differences and Pressures

As any reader who has engaged in an RPP will probably be unsurprised to learn, a common theme across these cases was timeline discrepancies across R and P sides. Practitioners do not have the luxury of waiting until a long research study is complete to make instructional decisions. They are constantly making a plethora of choices based on the best knowledge they have in a given moment. Researchers, too, can feel pressure to increase the pace in order to deliver products in time for annual evaluations or promotion and tenure review. This may lead researchers to hurry through the work of initial trust- and community-building to ensure ample time for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data ahead of their evaluation or promotion processes. Meanwhile, practitioners might grow impatient with the slow pace of analyzing data that can offer them concrete implications for practice (see Arce-Trigatti et al., 2022, for post-COVID examples of RPPs attempting to be more responsive to this need).

For many of the researchers in this volume, centering equity for students meant prioritizing the practitioners' needs, and thus timelines, over their own. Varier and colleagues adopted a mantra of "good things take time" to remind themselves to slow down. The university-based researcher in Chapter 9 by Oweyole and Arbogast paused their initial research timeline to provide a rapid response report to the district; however, this resulted in the researcher making "slower than desired progress on their publishing goals" (p. 139). Again, this points to the need for university promotion and tenure policies to value the extra time that trust building and maintenance requires when conducting studies as part of an RPP versus more traditional forms of research.

For researchers that were not based in a university, there was not the same pressure to publish studies within a particular time frame. In fact, the slower-than-anticipated pace of district turnaround serendipitously allowed more time for relationship-building. As the authors stated, this allowed them to “move at the speed of trust” with their partners, a phrase that also appears in the title of the chapter by Osai and colleagues: “Educational Equity Moves at the Speed of Trust: A Research Practice Partnership to Support Black Students’ Postsecondary Pathways.” Although the researchers in this case were based in a university, their womanist, humanizing approach meant that they placed their research agenda secondary to the good of the collective. As they wrote, “With RPPs, there is often a rush to get to the ‘doing of research’ but not sitting with the idea that research begins within the self, individual, or collective” (Osai, p. 130). When families and students are engaged in the co-production of knowledge, timelines may slow even further, as pointed out by Tichnor-Wagner and colleagues: “Involving more people requires more time to execute the work, particularly when it comes to gathering the perspectives of *all* community members” (p. 158).

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD: ATTENDING TO SHIFTING CONTEXTS

Navigating issues of educational equity is a bit like traversing shifting sands. The terrain is ever changing, and so what may have worked yesterday no longer works today. Particularly over the last four years, we have witnessed the most coordinated campaign against educational equity work in US history. Pollock and colleagues (2022) developed the label “Conflict Campaign” to refer to the nationwide efforts that have “both manufactured conflict to partisan ends, and exploited real divisions over how to teach about race and for inclusion in US society” (p. vi). They estimate that 35% of all K12 students in the US have been affected by the conflict campaign through state or local policy changes. The number would likely be much higher if it also included students in places without explicit prohibitions but where teachers nevertheless self-censor out of fear of local pushback. An Education Week survey found that 1 in 3 teachers have skipped or limited time spent on topics that they feared could be controversial (Sparks et al., 2024).

This campaign affects universities and colleges as well. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* began tracking the dismantling of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in higher education in 2024. At the time of writing, they found 192 college campuses in 26 states had experienced state-level actions such as banning DEI offices (Gretzinger et al., 2024).

Combine these trends with the aftermath of COVID-era school closures, the youth mental health crisis, teacher attrition and demoralization (Santoro, 2011), and coordinated efforts to privatize the public school system, and we get a sense of just how shaky the sands of equity-focused RPP work really

are. However, the cases in these chapters offer examples of how RPPs have flexibly adapted to their changing contexts in order to maintain their pursuit of equity.

One way in which many of the RPPs here kept equity at the fore, even amidst challenging contexts, was to infuse all aspects of their work with a theoretical orientation that maintains a focus on power and justice. Anderson (2023) pointed out that, even while attending to power within RPPs, much RPP research has not employed critical theories that deeply interrogate the political dimensions of their work, particularly with regard to race, identity, and positionality. The cases presented in this book provide examples of how employing lenses such as womanism, Chicana feminism, and resistance to white supremacy culture can facilitate reflexivity and ultimately more transformative partnership work. Scholars new to RPP work can learn a great deal from these stories as they consider critical theoretical lenses such as these in tandem with the questions posed in each element of our framework.

At the same time, critical approaches to education research—especially when not conducted in partnership with practitioners—often prioritize deconstruction, interrogation, and disruption over creation and implementation. Critique alone may earn status for those in academia but does little for the practitioners in need of practical guidance. Partnering with practitioners can help critical scholars balance the illuminating potential of social critique with the pragmatic potential of exploring and testing possible solutions in real-world settings. Some of the RPPs in this volume also demonstrated how more appreciative or affirmatory approaches, such as bright spot analyses, can be compatible with critical disruptions of power. We encourage the next generation of RPP scholars to balance critical and appreciative-pragmatic stances when considering the questions in the framework as they implement RPP studies.

A final word of advice for current and future RPP scholars is to reflect on the framework and cases presented here not only at the outset of RPP work but regularly throughout. We know from experience this is easier said than done. As described, equity-oriented RPPs often have to move at a slower pace than may be desirable for the R or P side in order to invest the necessary time for trust and relationship building. Taking additional time to reflect on the framework questions and case studies will be challenging. However, as several of the authors here put it, equity-oriented RPP work “moves at the speed of trust,” and regular reflection on how that trust is being sustained can ultimately produce more transformative results.

BUILDING ON THE FRAMEWORK MOVING FORWARD

The framework presented in Chapter 1 is meant to serve as a starting point for adaptations and future iterations, and we invite readers to expand on it in

ways helpful for your particular RPP. The case studies presented in this book already suggest numerous ways in which the framework could be elaborated. For instance, the framework currently asks how humanity is centered in the RPP project topic, but many of these case studies pointed to ways in which humanity can be centered alongside equity throughout all elements of the framework. Under “Equity in Method,” we could add, “In what ways do the methods appreciate the progress already being made toward transformation?” Under “Equity in Project Goals,” we could add, “How can the differing motivations for the work complement rather than compete with one another?” These are just a few examples of the many additional points for consideration that could be added to the framework to help guide users.

CONCLUSION

Investigating issues of educational inequities has always posed unique challenges when conducted through RPPs rather than traditional research structures. The P side is more vulnerable when the topic at hand is a sensitive one, and thus extra care must be taken to develop and maintain trust. Yet this collaborative approach has its rewards: it unlocks more nuanced insights and creates immediate real-world impact—both crucial elements when addressing equity issues. In other words, when the focus is equity, RPPs can be more precarious but also more effective than traditional approaches.

These two realities become even more pronounced in today’s heated political climate. As restrictive policies tighten their grip, particularly on practitioners, partnerships face increasing pressures. However, traditional research methods often fall short in capturing the subtle ways these policies shape real-world practices in specific contexts. Thus, while RPPs become more challenging to navigate in these turbulent times, they also become more indispensable.

We present this collection of case studies not just as a showcase of equity-oriented RPPs navigating treacherous political waters but as a beacon of inspiration. Our hope is to embolden current and future RPP leaders, encouraging them to take up this vital work, even as—and especially because—it grows more challenging by the day.

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Index

Note: Page numbers in **bold** indicate a table and page numbers in *italics* indicate a figure on the corresponding page.

- A+ Schools 119, 121–124, 132
- AccelerateKY 100
- accelerating learning 137, 149; in Kent 85–96
- advocacy: efforts 122; groups 41; organizations 47, 119; policy 122, 217; public 77
- “A-F” Accountability Rating system (Texas) 168
- Allbright, T. 9
- Anderson E. 219
- anti-Black racism, anti-Blackness 125, 130, 134, 136, 143
- anti-equity: backlash 3–7; efforts 5; political pressures 9
- anti-racism 41, 136, 216
- Arbery, A. 3
- Arbogast, E. 214–215, 217
- Arnett, N. 100, 103–104, 107, 108, 109
- asymmetrical expectations 22–23
- asymmetrical experiences 23–25
- asymmetry(ies) 48; in co-production 22; power 21, 216; recommendations for addressing 18; within partnerships 17
- autonomy: power and 28; researcher 48; school 13, 198, 202, 204; student 57
- Baker, C. 55–57, 62, 63, 66
- Bandola-Gill, J. 19
- Bell, M. 106
- bilingual education 167
- bilingualism 172, 173
- Blackburn, S. 104–105
- Black students 71–73, 75–76; RPP supporting postsecondary pathways for 119–132
- Black Women 4 Better Education 122
- blueprint partnership 182
- blueprint process 88–89, 91, 94
- Bolyard, J. 55–56, 62–63, 66
- borderlands and borders 172, 173, 178
- border community 177
- “Border is Me” 171, 172–174
- boundaries 15, 19, 21, 126; of methodological frameworks, testing of 105–106; neighborhood 123; organizational 50
- boundary-blurring 196
- boundary crossing 8, 79
- boundary management 19
- boundary practice(s) 8, 138
- boundary spanner 29, 137
- BPS *see* Boston Public Schools

- Bright Futures School **150, 151**
 “bright spots”: analyses 219; identifying 91; projects 94; schools 93; searching for 29, 85–96
 brokering 19, 39, 48, 136
 brokers: RPP 50, 100, 106, 107, 141–142
 Bryk, A. 148, 149
 burnout 130, 165
- Campbell, S. L. 128
 care 130; authentic 173; community 130; self-care 130, 165; trauma-informed 71, 73
 caregivers 10, 21, 158, 216
cariño (authentic care) 173
 Carnegie Foundation 160n1, 166
 Carnegie Mellon University 110
 Carnegie R1 status 178
 Casa School, The **150, 151**, 154, 155, 157
 case studies 6, 13–14, 37–80, 211–212; centering equitable relationships in a young RPP 39–52; cultivating a mutualistic partnership for inquiry 54–67; hierarchies as a subject in 215; reflecting on 219; sustaining a RPP while addressing disproportionality in school discipline 70–80
 Caven, M. 214, 218
Chronicle of Higher Education 218
 CHS *see* College in High School
 Ciudad Juárez 173
 CND *see* coaching network director
 coaching network director (CND) 135–144
 co-authors and authorship 55, 77, 121, 165, 167, 169
 co-construction of research design/agenda 39, 43
 co-creation: of culture of respect 205; of knowledge 14, 170; of shared priorities 185–187
 co-designed theory of action 199–200, 200
- Coenraad, M. 105–110
 Collective *see* JSITeacher Collective
 collective bargaining agreements 125
 collective care 130
 collective change 87, 95
 collective identities 172, 174
 collective struggle 125, 190
 collective understanding 57, 70
 College in High School (CHS) 121, 124–125, 128–129
 community: building, goals of 11; cultural wealth model 112; engagement 14, 26m 117; good 18; healing 110; income 100; knowledge 101; leader 99; narratives 110–112; organizations 27; values 29; voices 95
 community-engaged scholarship 17
 community(ies): accountability to 30; inclusive 45; K-12 60; NNERPP 9; practitioner 54; research 55; RPP 7; serving the 96; *see also* networked improvement communities (NICs)
 Community Partners (community partners) 10, 20, 23, 28
 community-related barriers 121
 commuter students 173
 computational thinking (CT) 99–101, 103, 106; community narratives inclusive of 110–113
 “Conflict Campaign” 218
 consultation fatigue 20
 consumerist approaches 20
 co-production and co-produced research 17–31; asymmetry in 22, 23; building the capacity of institutions to produce 29; critiques of 20–21; differentiated inclusion in 28; five arguments for 18; five meanings of 19; politics of 20; practice-side organizations and 27; purpose and benefits of 18–20; researchers in 26; recommendations for 27–30; research and research ethics in 24, 30–31; system-level

- inequities in 25–27; within-partnership asymmetries in 21–25
Courtyard Elementary **150**, 154
COVID-19 47, 59, 78, 140; changes brought by 3; disrupting inequities and 40; academic “rebounding” and “bounce-back” effect from 86; educational inequities exacerbated by 122; effects of closures on Kent school district 86–88; ESSER initiatives during 183; learning loss from 85, 87, 214; Main USD coaching impacted by 139–140; pivots in action and mindset due to 102; Pláticas RPP and 171; remote learning and 96; school closures due to 218; school lockdowns due to 171; social impacts of 203; sociopolitical environment, post COVID-19 122; under-resourced students and 85; unfinished learning due to 87
Crawford, D. 55–61, 64, 66
CRD *see* critical race design
critical race design (CRD) 129; design-based implementation research (DBIR) and 129
critical race theory (CRT) 129
CRT *see* critical race theory
CT *see* computational thinking
Curriculum Associates’ i-Ready Diagnostics 85

Datnow, A. 212
DBIR *see* design-based implementation research
DDOE *see* Delaware Department of Education
DEI *see* diversity, equity, and inclusion
Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) 181–191, 193
Delaware Early Literacy Research Practice Partnership (DEL RPP) 181–182

DEL RPP *see* Delaware Early Literacy Research Practice Partnership
design-based implementation research (DBIR) 140, 143, 214; CRD and 129
design framework: equity in RPP 9–13, 101–103
design gap 9
design research 7
Diamond, J. 9
Dickson, S. 213, 215
disability 40, 72, 134; adults living with 203; special education programs identifying 183; students with disabilities (SWD) 72, 182–183
disciplinary hearing review 73
disciplinary outcomes 72, 77
disciplinary practices: racial disparities in 11; racial equity in 77
discipline *see* disproportionality in school discipline
disproportionality in school discipline: racial 4, 71, 73, 76, 77, 78, 79; sustaining an RPP while addressing 70–80
district partners 26–27, 62–64, 76–78, 90, 92; *see also* BPS; REL-NEI
district-university relations 42, 137
diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) 72, 78, 136; dismantling of 218
dónde pueden pisar firme 171
Dunbar, K. 105–106, 107

early college high school (ECHS) approach 125
ECHS *see* early college high school (ECHS) approach
“ed scare” 5
educational equity 4, 6; trust and 119–132
educational improvement 8; A+ schools and 122–124
educational inequity 47, 90

- Elementary and Secondary School
Emergency Relief (ESSER)
resources 40
- Elementary and Secondary School
Emergency Relief (ESSER) II and III
initiative, Delaware 183
- El Paso 169; *see also* University of Texas at
El Paso (UTEP)
- El Paso-Juárez 168
- English Language Arts, Delaware state
assessment 183
- English language learners 85–86, 134
- English-only households 100
- English as Second Language 167; first
language not English **150**, 168
- equitable: access and support 4;
distribution of harms and costs 18;
education systems 5; participation
26, 42; partnership 30; practices 41;
processes 23; RPP design in action,
principles of 6; transformation 8, 13
- equitable engagement 17, 26; within
partnerships 27–29
- equitable literacy convening activities,
NIC for **152**
- equitable relationships 7; in a young RPP
39–52; in GEA²R 42–51; maintaining
14; sustaining 39
- Equitable Research Practice Partnerships
(RPP) 55–56; Equitable RPP
Relationships 10, *10*, **12**, 160
- equity: built-in, through participatory
research 128–130; as central
principle of RPPs 6–9; concepts of
9, 134–144, 174; current climate
towards 64–65; definitions of 174;
educational 119–132; enhanced, goal
of 130–131; frameworks for 27; in
methodology 113; in project design
and implementation 83–115; racial
3, 40, 77, 151–152, 159; role of
RPPs in promoting 8; in RPP design
frameworks 9–12; RPP partnership
built on 89; in schools 3–14; shared
commitments to 189–190, 192;
shared language of 3, 4, *10*, 11, **12**, 66,
102, 113–114, 130, 138, 152, 191;
shared understanding of, strategies to
develop 63–65
- equity focus, NIC **151**
- equity in method(s) *10*, 11, **12**, 51,
73–75, 91–92, 160; deliberation to
support 59–60
- equity-in-mission 8, 41
- equity in project goals and design *10*, 11,
12, 14
- equity in topic *10*, 11, **12**, 51, 89–91
- ESSER *see* Elementary and Secondary
School Emergency Relief (ESSER)
resources
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
(US) 6
- evidence-use intervention 19
- Farley-Ripple, E. 30
- Farrell, C. C. 8, 89, 101, 137, 147
- feminism, Chicana 219
- feminist: approach 142; methodology
169; movement 174
- Fields, H. (“Holly”) 165, 174, 175
- Flango, A. 126–127
- Florida 5
- Floyd County Schools 100–101; Amy
Newsom of 103, 106
- Floyd County Schools Innovation Summit
106
- Floyd, G. 3, 78, 134
- Flyvbjerg, B. 6
- Fogarty, J. 121, 123
- fronteriza* 172; *see also* borderlands and
borders
- Garden Academy **150**, **151**, 154–156
- gardens: community 203; student
203
- GEA²R 42–51

- gender: race, class, and 63, 202; race, ethnicity, and 41; race, program, and 90; race, sexuality, and 211
- geopolitical border 172
- Henrick, E. C. 7–8, 39
- high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) 182–183, 189–190
- historically marginalized students and families: school improvement processes and 147–160
- Holly *see* Fields, H.
- HQIMs *see* high-quality instructional materials
- identity 22, 28, 58; cultural 166; race, positionality, and 219; racial 40
- inclusion 125, 216; co-production and 19; differentiated 27–28; equitable 139; explicit 149; principle of 28; teaching about 218; *see also* DEI
- inequity(ies) 6; academic 43, 48; addressing 124, 181, 191; disrupting 40, 46; downstream 29; educational 12, 39, 47, 119, 122, 147, 181, 184, 191–192, 220; eliminating 56; exposing 30, 54; identifying 78, 129; JSI and Pittsburgh Public Schools 120–124; mitigating 189; observed 130; perpetuating 63, 205; persistent 40; racial 131, 148–149, 152–153, 160; real 49; redressing 125; remedying 51; root causes of 27, 151; seeking the causes of 214; structural 192; systemic 18, 89, 120, 126, 131, 190, 197; system-level 21, 25–27; systems of 203; transforming 51
- instrumental argument for co-production 18–20
- instrumental use 22
- intra-institutional dynamics 46–47, 50
- Isaac, D. 100
- Isela *see* Peña, I.
- Iwatani, E. 105–110
- JSI *see* Justice Scholars Institute
- Justice Scholars Institute (JSI) 118–131; inequities in Pittsburgh Public Schools addressed by 120–124
- Justice Scholars Institute (JSI) Teacher Collective (the Collective) 120, 128–129
- Kent School District (KSD) 86–96
- Kentucky 99–101, 110–112
- knowledge: arbiters of 196; co-creating 14; community 101; context-dependent 6; creation of 54, 55, 95; expert 92; extraction 25; hierarchies of 192; “new” 24; practical 23; practice-based 30; production of 11; relational 125; scientific 22; sharing of 20
- knowledge claims 21
- knowledge democracy 19
- knowledge gaps 87
- knowledge generation 18, 91
- knowledge-sharing 50
- KSD *see* Kent School District
- large urban school district (LUSD) 39–48, 51
- learning loss 85, 87, 214
- LGBTQ youth 41, 47
- locus of control 13, 203, 206
- locus of decision-making 10
- Love, Bettina 144
- LUSD *see* large urban school district
- Main Unified School District (Main USD) 134–144, 145n1
- MARPP *see* mid-Atlantic RPP
- mental health and wellness 171; youth 218
- Mexican Americans 174

- Mexico 167–168, 172; *see also* United States–Mexico border
- Meza-Chavez, J. (“Jeannie”) 165, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175
- mid-Atlantic RPP (MARPP) 72–79
- Ming, N. 213, 215
- mixed messages 3
- mixed methods 59–60, 77, 95, 137
- MLs *see* multilingual learners
- multilingual communities 190
- multilingual learners (MLs) 135, 182
- mutualism 7–8
- mutualistic partnership for inquiry 54–67
- NAEP *see* National Assessment of Educational Progress
- Naff, D. 213–214
- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 182
- National Network of Education Research Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) 4, 6, 9
- Naval Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (NJROTC) program 168
- NCLB *see* No Child Left Behind Act (US)
- networked improvement communities (NICs) 7, 147–149, 157–159; accessibility challenges in 156; community representation in 156; grade-band challenges in 155; NIC for equitable literacy convening activities **152**; NIC for equitable literacy model in RPPs 148–153; school NIC team composition and equity focus **151**; time (finding) as challenge for 156–157
- Networked Improvement Community for Equitable Literacy (NICEL) 120–148, 151–152, 154–159; improvement science used in 152, 156–159; intentionality as priority of 155, 158, 159; on-the-ground challenges for 155–157, 158; strategies developed by 157–158; time as challenge for 156–157
- Newsom, A. 103, 106
- NICs *see* networked improvement communities
- NICEL *see* Networked Improvement Community for Equitable Literacy
- NNERPP *see* National Network of Education Research Practice Partnerships
- No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) 6
- normative arguments for co-production 18–19
- NTD *see* New Teacher Development Program (BPS)
- NWEA MAP Growth Assessment 85–86
- Oliver, K. 18, 19
- OMB *see* Office of Management and Budget
- opportunity costs 24
- Osai, E. 125, 127, 128
- Owens, A. 100–101, 111
- Oweyole, K. A. 214–215, 217
- participatory: analysis 202; approach(es) 26, 120, 131, 186; development 18, 20; dynamics 26, 213; lens 95; methodology 130; methods 21, 27; processes 143; production 24; research 17, 124, 128–130; research methods 125
- partnership development 182
- partnership projects 137
- Paso Del Norte Partnership for Education Research (PDNPER) 165, 167, 171
- Pathways High **150**, **151**, 154, 156
- PDNPER *see* Paso Del Norte Partnership for Education Research
- Peña, I. (“Isela”) 165, 171, 172, 174
- PEN America 5

- Penuel, W.R. 8
- Perry High School *see* Pittsburg Perry High School
- Pikeville Independent Schools 101; Neil Arnett of 103–104; Sarah Blackburn of 104–105
- Pittsburg Milliones 121, 123–124
- Pittsburg Perry High School 121–124
- Pittsburg Westinghouse Academy 121, 122–124, 126–127
- pivots and pivoting in RPP 99–114; importance of pivots, in navigating equity in RPP design 112–113; practice-side 105; practitioner 103–105; practitioner reflections on 105; productive 101; researcher 105–106; researcher reflections on 106–110; team 110–113
- PK12 systems and system context 5, 7, 9–10, 10; asset-based approach to improving 78; as barriers or facilitators of school improvement 201, 203; defining 13; distributed leadership for 201–202; equitable RPP relationships and 201; equity-focused research with universities partnered with 77–79; literacy challenges and 182; locus of control for 13, 203, 206; as material reality 202–204; RPP boundary-blurring 196; RPPs and 70–71, 196–206; sociopolitical realities of 204–205
- Pláticas 169–178, 216
- policy: challenges 19; early education 184; education 190; federal 6; implementing 9; outcomes 193; PK12 System 13; practice and 40, 45, 50–51, 70, 76, 78, 186, 192, 196–197; promotion and tenure 217–218; relevance 187; science in 19; RPPs linking of practice and 181; school-based equity roundtable (SBERT) 153–154
- policy advocacy 77, 217; by A+ Schools 122; constraints on 217
- policy language 30
- policy makers 20, 21, 23, 25, 75, 79, 212
- policy mandates 55, 64
- political: backlash 4; power 3, 7; shifts in education 4; tensions 26, 41; violence 143
- political arguments for co-production 18–19
- political climate and context 9, 199; Delaware 182; Texas 168; Washington State 96; *see also* sociopolitical context
- politics of co-production 21
- Pollock, M. 218
- positionality 7, 26, 169, 219; *see also* identity
- power 9, 10; asymmetries of 21; autonomy and 28; hierarchies and human dimensions of partnerships and 215–217; imbalanced 77; knowledge and 20; misappropriation of 128; political 3; professional 21; social justice and 64; systems of 3, 7, 41; teaching and 63
- power differentials and differences 19–20, 115n1; recognizing 22
- power dynamics 7–8, 14, 17, 20–21, 23, 25; avoiding 130; calibrating 101; funding 188; hierarchical 129; imbalanced 42–43, 47–48, 50; intra-institutional 47; knowledge related 17; knowledge of team and 192; leveling 137; managing 26; navigating 39; position and 50; REAL and LUSD 39, 41–42, 46–47, 51; relationship equity and 201; RPP 102, 129, 196; traditional 8; unequal 28
- practice-based knowledge 30
- practice(s): assessment 59, 66; boundary 8; brokering 48; building-specific 90, 92; data 112; data use 58; discipline/disciplinary 11, 72–77; equitable 41; evidence-based 79; inequitable

- 40; innovative 149; instructional 63; local problems of 7; policy and 31, 40, 45, 50–51, 70, 76, 78, 186, 192, 196–197; problems of 43–44; research as service to 57; systemic inequities at the level of 18; theory vs. 128; working in 71; *see also* research practice partnerships (RPPs)
- practice organizations 28, 29
- practice-side: activities 101; experience 114; expertise 46; organizations 27; partners 101, 105–106, 107, 109–110, 112, 115, 135, 137; pivot 103, 105; RPP leaders 13; tensions and tradeoffs 17–31
- problem solving 100; CT and 109 realistic couplings 26
- professional development (PD): coach 135; impact of COVID-19 on 102; DDOE 184, 185, 189, 190; Kentucky 110; Pitt 125; programming 198; RPP 104; RPST 199; STEAM/CT 103; teacher 3–4, 13, 199, 202, 203; *see also* New Teacher Development Program (NTD)
- professional goals 136
- professional learning programs 197
- project goals 56, 58, 59, 64, 65, 112–114; equity in 10, 11, 12, 57–59, 152; identifying 174
- promotion and tenure 12–13, 26, 211, 217
- protocol 156; interview 91, 138
- P side (policymakers, practitioners, parents, pupils) 21–25, 42, 49, 213
- Purinton, A. 215
- R1 university (UrbanU) 39–51
- race: data disaggregation per 90; income and 119; of students 150; teaching about 218
- race/ethnicity 75; as federal category 86
- race, ethnicity, and disability 73
- race, ethnicity, and gender 41, 219
- race, gender, and class 63, 202
- race, gender, and sexuality 211
- race, identity, and positionality 219
- racial: affinity spaces 136; disparities, in disciplinary practices 11; disproportionality, in school discipline 71–72, 77–78, 213; equity 40, 77, 151–152, 159; equity initiatives 149; inequities 153; justice 132, 217; justice movements 40, 122
- racial inequality *see* inequality
- racially segregated schools 119
- racism 130, 148; anti-Black 134, 143; sexism and 5
- REAL *see* Research for Equity Alliance
- reciprocal respect 125, 216
- Regional Education Lab Southwest 39
- REs *see* Regional Educational Laboratories
- research: alternatives to 30; how to 30; as service 57, 63; what to 29–30
- research alliances 7
- “Research for Equity Alliance” (“REAL”) 39–43, 47, 50–51, 52n4
- researchers 26; *see also* R-side (Researcher)
- research ethics 24
- research methods 26–27
- research partners
- research partnerships 21
- Research Partnership for School Transformation (RPST) 197–199, 201, 203–204
- Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs): to accelerate learning in Kent 85–96; brokers 50, 100, 106, 107, 141–142; definitions of 101; definitions of equity in 5, 7–9, 11; design framework, equity in 9–13, 101–103; emboldening present and future leaders in 211–220; equitable 55; equitable relationships in 10,

- 10; equitable RRP relationships, communication to support 61–63; equitable RRP relationships, strategies to support 60–61; equity in design framework of 9–13, 101–103; equity-focused RPP design, questions to forming an RPP 88–89; function of 95; maintaining RPP partnerships through reflexivity to cultivate mindset for 65–66; shifting sociopolitical context 78–79; NIC for equitable literacy model in 148–153; support 12; “State of the Field” 5, 71; supporting postsecondary pathways for Black students 119–132; two key tenets of 89; university-district-nonprofit 147–160; *see also* MARPPs; pivots and pivoting in RPP
- respect *see* reciprocal respect
- Rincones, R. (“Rodolfo”) 165, 171, 172, 174, 175
- Rodolfo *see* Rincones, R.
- Rogelio *see* Segovia, R.
- RPST *see* Research Partnership for School Transformation
- R-side (Researcher) 21–23, 49, 215
- San Elizario Independent School District (SEISD) 165, 167–172, 175–178; UTEP-SEISD RPP 169, 171, 177
- saviorism 25, 28
- SBERT *see* school-based equity roundtable (SBERT) policy
- school-based equity roundtable (SBERT) policy 153–154
- school improvement processes 147–160; *see also* educational improvement; improvement science
- science-politics, theme of 19
- science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM)/CS pathway 100, 103
- Segovia, R. (“Rogelio”) 165, 172, 173, 174, 175
- SEISD *see* San Elizario Independent School District
- self-care 130, 165
- self-discovery 170
- self-study (“research begins with the self”) 218
- Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR) Blueprint 100, 111
- shared commitments to equity 189–190, 192
- shared goals 3, 4, 88, 194
- shared language 55, 90
- shared language of equity 3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 66, 102, 113–114, 130, 138, 152; creating 191
- shared purpose 88
- shared research dissemination 141
- shared research inquiry and design 141
- shared understanding 57
- shifting contexts, attending to 218–219
- Singer-Gabella, M. 52n1, 215
- SOAR *see* Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR) Blueprint
- sociopolitical climate 63–65
- sociopolitical context 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 13, 14, 39, 50–51; learning communities in 196; RPP partnership work and 78–79
- sociopolitical environment, post COVID-19 122
- standards of evidence 214–215
- STEAM *see* science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM)/CS pathway
- Stop WOKE Act (Florida) 5
- student achievement 6, 41, 63, 90; achievement gap in 120; measurable 128; teacher leadership and 200, 204
- students: of color 42, 151; computational literacy for 99, 110; COVID-19’s impact on 86; decision-making by 154; doctoral 56, 73; education equity for 87; empowering 95; graduate 49; K-12

- 25; Latina/o/x and low-income 71, 76; lived experiences of 92; low income 90; marginalized 79; meeting needs of 57; remote learning for 96; rural 99; sorting and ranking of 63; supporting 64; under-resourced 85; vulnerable 94; *see also* Black students; historically marginalized students and families
- students with disabilities (SWD) 72, 182–183
- substantive arguments for co-production 18–19
- SWD *see* students with disabilities power dynamics 25
- systemic: barriers 56, 119, 121, 123, 131, 148; constraints 14; educational challenges 125; inequalities 126; inequities 18, 89, 120, 122, 190; injustice 9; opportunities for improvement 94; racial inequities 149; racism 3, 5
- systemic change 28; to institutions and norms 29; meaningful 95
- Tackett, T. 100–101, 106, 107, 111
- Taylor, B. 3
- Teacher Collective (the Collective) 128
- teachers *see* professional development; well-being
- TEKS *see* Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills
- tension(s) 4, 50, 50, 174–176, 192–193; between public schools and universities 176; challenges and 148; in collaborations 102; dynamic 65; lessening 128; in Pláticas RPP 176–178; project related 139; navigating 126; political 26, 41; practice-side tradeoffs and 17–31; tradeoffs and 11, 157–158; value related 100; within MARPP partnerships 76, 77; within RPPs 71
- Texas 169, 172; *see also* University of Texas El Paso (UTEP)
- Texas Education Agency, lawsuit against 168
- Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year state win 168
- Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) 167
- The Learning Accelerator (TLA) 87–96
- theory 55, 174, 213–214; critical race 129; ecological systems 89, 90; practice vs. 128
- theory of action 190; co-designed 199–200, 200; NIC 149
- theory of change 111, 191
- theory-building 214
- theory-practice divide 128
- Tichnor-Wagner, A. 214, 216, 218
- timeline differences and pressures 217–218
- TLA *see* The Learning Accelerator
- tokenism 20, 25
- transdisciplinarity 19
- Trujillo, T. 190
- trust: educational equity and 119–132; first-person narrative of 126–128
- trust building 14, 21, 43, 50, 70, 92, 142, 159
- UID *see* University of Delaware
- under-resourced: partners 24; students 85, 91
- underserved: communities 120; public schools 124; schools 121–122, 131; students 136–137
- unfinished learning 87
- Unified School District (USD) *see* Main Unified School District (Main USD)
- United States–Mexico border 168, 172
- University of Delaware (UD) 181–182, 184–185, 188
- University of Florida 5
- University of Pittsburg 120; *see also* Justice Scholars Institute (JSI)

- University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP)
165–169, 171, 173, 177–178
- UrbanU *see* R1 university
- UTEP *see* University of Texas at El Paso

- Varier, D. 55–56, 63, 214, 216, 217
- vulnerable, vulnerability(ies) 49, 170,
178, 91, 193; exposing 21; honesty
and 206; to impacts of COVID-19 85;
of PK12 partners 77; sense of 41, 47;
student 91, 94

- Waldrop, R. 214–215
- Wallace Foundation Distinguished Lecture
212
- well-being: educator 165–179; public 18;
student 173, 174

- Westinghouse Academy *see* Pittsburg
Westinghouse Academy
- white supremacy culture 219
- WOKE: Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids
and Employees (Stop WOKE) Act
(Florida) 5
- womanism 125, 216, 218, 219

- Yamashiro, K. 8, 213
- Yosso, T. 112
- youth: Black 119, 122, 124, 126, 130;
of color 119, 121–122; inequities
facing 49; LGBTQ 41, 47;
marginalized 120; mental health
crisis among 218
- youth-focused community organizations
148