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RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: DEMOCRATIZING INQUIRY AND PREFIGURING MORE JUST SCHOLARLY RELATIONS

A Policy Research Brief

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- ☐ What Are RPPs?
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This publication of the James R. Squire Office on Policy Research offers perspectives with implications for policy decisions that affect literacy education, teaching, and learning. Ernest Morrell, professor and director of the University of Notre Dame's Center on Literacy Education (South Bend, Indiana), directs the Squire Office on behalf of NCTE and creates research and reports with the involvement of literacy education leaders in the field.

The scene may be familiar to many educators and school leaders: it's a professional development day, and a district community is gathered to hear about the latest research, undertaken by outside experts, which they are then asked to "roll out" in their sites of practice "with fidelity." These research insights are often separate from educators' day-to-day inquiries or the specific reforms a school may already be undertaking. They may be presented in top-down ways and with the urgency to shift curricular focus onto areas determined a priori. Such a bifurcated relationship between research and practice is premised on "prevailing concepts of the teacher as technician, consumer, receiver, transmitter, and implementor of other people's knowledge" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 16). A number of different scholarly traditions—including teacher research and participatory and community-based methodologies—have sought to challenge this dichotomy and argue for more mutually-constructed and locally-grounded research endeavors where those impacted by educational systems, such as teachers, students, and families, play key roles in generating knowledge to transform them.

In the field of literacy, there has been a rich tradition of partnering with youth as co-researchers who investigate educational issues, challenge oppressive pedagogies, and imagine new curricular pathways more attuned to students' experiences (Morrell, 2004).

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are an emerging paradigm which also productively challenges this hierarchical approach and puts research and practice in a dialectical relationship with one another. In this brief, we unpack how RPPs have been conceptualized, consider what we can learn from other types of research partnerships that emerge from grassroots efforts informed by critical theory, and offer recommendations for those interested in developing RPPs committed to equity and social transformation.

What are RPPs?

Farrell et al. (2021, p. IV) characterize RPPs as "a long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research," highlighting that "these partnerships are intentionally organized to connect diverse forms of expertise and shift power relations in the research endeavor to ensure that all partners have a say in the joint work." This definition highlights equity as a key concern in RPPs (see also Henrick et al., 2019; Vetter et al., 2022).

Some RPPs link equity more strictly to their discrete outcomes, for example, seeking to correct or mitigate disparities in measures such as test scores or suspension rates among different populations. Others envision equity as a principle that guides the inquiry process, with greater attention to how research practices might reinforce or challenge traditional hierarchies in knowledge production (Farrell et al., 2021). In this case, an RPP would take a step back and engage multiple stakeholders in interrogating systemic inequities in the education system. While we acknowledge

that both approaches to RPPs come with their own affordances and challenges, in this brief, our reflections and recommendations are grounded in a vision which undertakes equity as a compass for research outcomes and processes.

From this perspective, RPPs have the potential to model more just relationships between universities and partners. It is not possible to materialize equity in the research process when it reproduces hierarchical dichotomies—between the roles of researcher and practitioner, scholar and technician, the one who thinks and the one who executes, the one who theorizes experiences and the one who lives the experiences. Thus, RPPs that seek equity in both their goals and processes require intentional work in valuing multiple perspectives and forms of expertise.

Research agendas and questions should be open-ended and responsive to the evolving needs of partnering communities and sites of practice (Ghiso & Campano, 2024).

Redefining what counts as knowledge and who gets to produce it blurs the boundaries of traditional roles in research partnerships for all of its members (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Strand et al., 2003). Farrell et al. (2021, p. 23) point out that "in many RPPs, teachers, administrators, and community members take on new roles in gathering data, analyzing results, and drawing conclusions," while "researchers are active participants in decisions on implementation and adaptation, quite unlike traditional research projects where they keep implementation at arm's length for fear of disrupting results" (p. 23). In this context, researchers and practitioners involved in equity-focused partnership work together in mutuality across all stages of research, seeking common goals based on problems of practice (Vetter et al., 2022). Precisely because of their efforts to respect all partners as intellectuals and decision makers, RPPs might present themselves as more flexible than other research approaches. Research agendas and questions should be open-ended and responsive to the evolving needs of partnering communities and sites of practice (Ghiso & Campano, 2024).

Learning from Critical Approaches to Partnering

One observation and potential area of growth is that although RPPs increasingly have a focus on transforming inequitable systems, they have had relatively little explicit engagement with critical theory, intellectual legacies dedicated to human emancipation. Ishimaru et al. (2022) note that "until recently most systems-focused RPPs have not centrally addressed issues of race, equity, and power in education" (p. 466). Often, RPPs' underlying epistemologies are positivist in orientation, with a belief in value neutrality manifested in concepts such as universally applicable best practices to literacy instruction. This is no surprise as it is the dominant approach in social sciences informing educational policy. It nonetheless delimits RPPs' promise to embody, and make normative claims about, alternative intellectual

communities better suited to the holistic thriving of students who have experienced marginalization in schooling.

Farrell et al. (2021) note that RPPs can learn from collaborative approaches to research that exist on the "boundaries" of the RPP paradigm, including participatory design research (e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), Youth Participatory Action Research (Cammarota & Fine, 2010), and collaborative community-engaged research (Warren, 2018). The authors suggest that these approaches, which share a family resemblance to one another as well as the broader RPP paradigm, are especially attentive to issues of power, centering the lived experiences of those most impacted by educational inequities. Building off this important insight, we believe they are more than peripheral, calling attention to a rich alternative genealogy of research that predates, travels alongside, overlaps with, and often productively challenges more mainstream RPPs. While the literature on RPPs originally grew out of a need to reimagine collaborative work between universities and school districts, and have often involved upper-level administrators, the tradition of community-based, participatory, and practitioner research has developed at a more grassroots level. They share many of the characteristics of RPPs, such as reimagining the relationship between theory and practice, but are also grounded in social movements and intellectual legacies such as Indigenous philosophy, anticolonialism, Black critical theory, Freirean conscientização, queer studies, and intersectional feminism.

Rooted in resistance, this alternative genealogy provides much needed explanatory accounts of how power operates to produce social stratification in the educational system. However, as relational methodologies, they go beyond critique to demonstrate how the collaborative research process itself may prefigure educational arrangements that foster community autonomy and individual and collective self-determination (Ghiso & Campano, 2024). They are also often undergirded by a set of values that exist in contra-distinction to the violence of individualistic competition, ranking, dispossession, and supremacy—characteristics which, unfortunately, remain hard-wired into much of the educational system. As the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) writes, research ought to be informed by "gentleness, humility, carefulness, and the ability to proceed slowly"—qualities which tend to be "liabilities at the university" (p.14).

Reconstructing this genealogy would be a valuable scholarly task beyond the scope of this brief. We do point to a few touchstones. One place we suggest starting is the scholarship of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) in partnership with the First Lights Education Project. They understand their work as Community-Based Inquiry (CBI), "a research method in which Indigenous communities engage in asking and answering their own questions about their early childhood practices, calling on ancestral knowledge, the wisdom of elders, data-gathering methodologies, and an intimate understanding of their

own communities" (Yazzie-Mintz et al., 2024, pp. 1–2). Of note is that in CBI, the scholarship belongs unequivocally to the community, distinct from RPPs, which have methodological resonance, but often prioritize university-based researchers' agendas. Members of the collaborative view research as an ongoing "journey," with no terminal point. "While there are outcomes," the goal ultimately "is to deepen the capacities of" and "strengthen" the community (Terronnes, 2024, p. 55). The IELC takes a learning stance from broader conversations in the field regarding partnership work, but it will not hesitate to engage in a politics of refusal should any institutional interference compromise the collaborative's autonomy and ability to draw from solutions that already exist within the community (Ullrich et al., 2024) premised on Indigenous beliefs and practices. For example, Terrones (2024) stories how early learning can be reframed through "land-based pedagogies."

In the field of literacy, there has been a rich tradition of partnering with youth as co-researchers who investigate educational issues, challenge oppressive pedagogies, and imagine new curricular pathways more attuned to students' experiences (Morrell, 2004). The Council of Youth Research (Mirra et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2015) and Cyphers for Justice (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020; Lyiscott et al., 2020; Filipiak et al., 2020) are collectives where youth and their allies have engaged in conducting research aimed at improving urban education and lifting youth perspectives on educational change. This work is grounded in Black studies and forms of cultural production, Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and numerous other critical traditions. These legacies have also flowered throughout the Global South (Rappaport, 2020) more recently, under the rubric of horizontal methodologies (e.g. Corona Berkin, 2020; Rodríguez González, 2025). In Brazil, the PROFLETRAS master's programs for public school language arts teachers, created in 2013, are an example of a nationwide inservice education project that leverages teachers as intellectuals, authors, and researchers (Nóvoa, 2017). Drawing on critical pedagogies (Freire, 1967, 1996) and interactionist language studies (Antunes, 2003; Bakhtin, 1997; Dolz & Schneuwly, 2004), teachers have built a nationwide collaborative network, developing research in response to the challenges and goals of the communities they serve (e.g., Sigiliano et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 crisis of educational access and student mental health, for example, Abritta et al. (2023) developed a classroom-based research project that incorporated student narratives into the formal curricular subject of argumentation, which provided insights into youth experiences and affectively transformed the digital learning space. Teachers are grassroots theorizers of their own practice, and the pedagogical and philosophical go hand in hand.

We have called our own involvement in the Communities Advancing Research in Education (CARE) Initiative, a 15-year partnership between university-based scholars and Philadelphia families who

are investigating issues of educational access, Community-Based Research in Education (Campano et al., 2022; Ghiso & Campano, 2024). The work has been influenced by feminist of color epistemologies (Alcoff, 2006; Moya, 2002; Mohanty, 2003), the practitioner research movement, and local legacies of organizing and inquiry (e.g., Rusoja et al., 2023). The partnership was initiated by community members, yet they made it clear from the beginning that they did not want their knowledge and stories to be extracted from their lived, relational contexts. The CARE Initiative has thus developed norms which guide the work premised on the assumption of radical equality (Campano et al., 2015). The CARE Initiative has conducted original research on topics such as tracking, the material realities of schooling, and college access. But the space of the community has also been transformed in the process. As individuals developed relationships of solidarity across boundaries of race, class, language, generation, and immigration status, they also cultivated a local intellectual commons and ever-expanding networks of care and support (Ghiso et al., 2022).

We as a field need to be more creative in designing inclusive research partnerships committed to the ultimate goal of a more just education for all.

Partnerships originate from different institutional and social locations and vary in the kinds of work they do to improve education. RPPs which begin at an upper administrative level, for example between district leaders and university researchers, are positioned well to influence policy, but they are rarely deeply informed by the insights and interests of families. Conversely, RPPs which emerge at a more grassroots level, for example in a community-based organization, may have a local impact on individuals' schools, but they rarely shape district or state policy. We as a field need to be more creative in designing inclusive research partnerships committed to the ultimate goal of a more just education for all.

There will always be a tension between transforming inequitable systems and participating in them through RPPs. Whether or not a particular collaborative project or partnership defines itself, or is defined by others, as an RPP, the promise of this collective body of scholarship is its capacity to democratize inquiry, challenge extractivism, cultivate more reciprocal and caring relationships, learn from multiple ways of knowing and being in the world, and advance social justice. It also holds the promise of going beyond instrumental outcomes to nurturing something rarely discussed in educational research, policy, and practice: wisdom.

Suggestions for Developing Equitable RPPs Dedicated to Educational Transformation

- **Cultivate humility and learn from local efforts.** RPPs dedicated to educational transformation will in many cases build from local social justice legacies. For example, because the CARE Initiative was interested in supporting immigrant students, we spent our first year, before a partnership was even formed, meeting with already existing grassroots

immigrant rights organizations. Following Freire, all members of an RPP ought to cultivate the humility to learn from others and be sensitized to the knowledge already existent in communities. This way, an RPP can situate itself thoughtfully within a broader constellation of efforts to bring about change.

- **Take seriously multiple perspectives.** In the CARE Initiative, an important driving concept is the idea that those most directly impacted by educational inequities are in a unique position to inquire into them and generate new knowledge about how to do things better. If everyone's knowledge and expertise is not taken seriously, we believe there can be no genuine trust or sense of belonging in a partnership. This is especially important for individuals who have been subject to testimonial injustices (Fricker, 2007), whose knowledge and insights have been deflated or dismissed by those in power due to an aspect of their ascribed identities (e.g., race, gender, educational level, immigration status). Research design ought to center their voices.
- **Create horizontal processes for research collaboration.** It is important that all participants in an RPP feel as if they have a valuable role and say in the collaborative work. During the early stages of a project, the group might establish norms for the partnership and a shared governance structure, making decisions together about the purposes and audiences of the research, who "owns" the scholarship (e.g., will it be part of an intellectual commons?), and when and how the partnership might go public with its findings. In some contexts, it may be useful to implement a community-based IRB protocol, where families themselves have ethical oversight, ensuring cultural relevancy and that participants do not feel exploited by extractivist approaches to research.
- **Ensure equitable distribution of resources.** What are the benefits, material or otherwise, to being involved in partnership? Is everyone's intellectual labor and expertise being recognized and compensated? University-based researchers often engage in RPPs as part of their salaried professions. This may not be the case for a parent, who is working multiple jobs while trying to advocate for their children's education. Will the parent receive a stipend for their intellectual labor? What resources will community organizations, teachers, and youth receive as co-researchers (e.g. technology infrastructure, professional development credits, travel funds, etc.)?
- **Embrace methodological creativity.** RPPs often require creative forms of inquiry to ensure that all participants develop the intellectual assurance to engage in research, share their knowledge, and mobilize their expertise and lived experiences. These might include, for example, artistic methods such as photovoice, or cultural ways of knowing such as storytelling or testimonios. The point is not to dichotomize dominant from alternative epistemic practices. What is important is that RPPs embrace a robust methodological pluralism in the spirit of democratizing research.

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