

Equity-Centered Research–Practice Partnerships: An Approach for Advancing Educator Diversity in Education Systems

Teachers College Record

1–7

© Teachers College 2024

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/01614681241227054

journals.sagepub.com/home/tcz

Conra D. Gist, PhD¹, Emma Parkerson, MSOD²,
and Ke Wu, JD²

Abstract

The importance of educator diversity is becoming increasingly evident as research demonstrates the positive impact of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers (TOCIT) on student learning and achievement, particularly among underrepresented groups (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Shirrell et al., 2021). Despite this, progress toward diversifying the educator workforce remains slow, signaling the need to advance educator diversity through a radical reimagining of teacher development systems. The use of research–practice partnership (RPP), a research approach that facilitates collaboration between practitioners and researchers, may be a promising model for addressing this perennial challenge.

Keywords

ethnoracial educator diversity, equity, research–practice partnerships, Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color educators

The importance of educator diversity is becoming increasingly evident as research demonstrates the positive impact of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers (TOCIT) on student learning and achievement, particularly among underrepresented groups (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Shirrell et al., 2021). Despite this, progress toward diversifying the educator workforce remains

¹College of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Houston, TX, USA

²Systems Design Lab, USA

Corresponding Author:

Conra D. Gist, College of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Houston, TX, USA.

Email: cdgist@uh.edu

slow, signaling the need to advance educator diversity through radically reimagining (i.e., envisioning novel and unconventional approaches to address persistent inequities; Kelley, 2002) teacher development systems. A community of over 75 researchers began consolidating research to catalyze progress and published the *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers* (Gist & Bristol, 2022), outlining research and policy directives related to recruiting, preparing, supporting, and retaining TOCIT in K–12 schools. One recommendation of the *Handbook* is to use research–practice partnerships (RPPs) to address local problems of practice related to ethnoracial educator diversity.

The National Center for Research on Educator Diversity’s (NCRED) mission is to advance educator diversity (NCRED, 2023). Carrying the recommendation on RPPs from the *Handbook* one step forward, NCRED launched the Educator Diversity RPP Lab in 2023, composed of RPPs from across the nation committed to radically reimagining teacher development systems. At NCRED, we believe RPPs hold promise for uniquely addressing educator diversity and, networked together, can serve as fertile ground for applying and generating research through genuine collaboration among practitioners, researchers, and local communities. The partnerships in the Educator Diversity RPP Lab are working together to authentically center equity in RPPs by starting to radically reimagine domains of teacher development systems, such as mentorship. RPP Lab members have a vision of mentorship as a safe, community-oriented system of mutual investment among TOCIT that supports practitioners at various stages of their career to navigate power dynamics, and sustain their wellness and longevity in the teaching profession. With RPPs in the Lab working toward testing their designs—like structures that foster mutual investment among TOCIT—in their local contexts, we will build on the extant research literature about RPPs in general and expand the limited research literature on RPPs dedicated to educator diversity.

RPPs for System Transformation

RPPs hold promise for system transformation in education. They have historically been defined as long-term collaborations between researchers and practitioners addressing persistent problems of practice (Henrick et al., 2017). The core tenets of RPPs involve establishing routines for working together, norms for decision making, and respect for diverse perspectives, and considering the varied roles and demands of team members (William T. Grant Foundation, 2023). More recently, Farrell et al. (2021) offer a definition for RPPs that fosters educational equity in partnerships, describing them as:

A long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research. RPPs 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. (p. iv)

This focus on equity is key, as Diamond (2021) notes that many RPPs opt for a mainstream framework devoid of critical perspectives, arguing “. . .that these truncated theoretical foundations need to be reexamined if RPPs seek to live up to their transformative aspirations” (p. 3). Ishimaru et al. (2022) provide a way of moving toward transformative realities by suggesting three shifts related to RPPs’ use in education: (1) center justice in multidimensional systems change; (2) develop equity-centered data systems; and (3) enlist the expertise of racially minoritized youth, families, and communities. RPPs must be positioned as a mechanism for equitable transformation in order to engineer systems change. For example, by grounding them in participatory research (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) and solidarity co-design (Ishimaru et al., 2019), RPPs enable solutions to be generated from, with, and for the community. This approach helps decolonize research (Patel, 2015) by exploring how community members organize, develop theories of change, and implement nontraditional approaches to advance educator diversity.

Though the potential benefits of RPPs are straightforward (i.e., coordination of education researchers, practitioners, and community stakeholders toward a central focus and public good, and enhanced relevance of research in policy and practice; Welsh, 2021), they are not without challenges. Aligning the interests and investments of multiple stakeholders requires skill, and the process necessitates significant time and effort (Booker, 2023). RPPs do not offer quick fixes; forming and sustaining RPPs that center community engagement and adopt an intersectional stance develops over time through constant refinement (Ishimaru et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, the long-term impact of RPPs resides in their potential for fostering a regenerative and liberatory culture among researchers, educators, and community members. By engaging in generative conflict and co-design, RPPs can develop more effective interventions that incorporate relational knowledge from community members, K–12 students, and teachers, ultimately yielding greater results (Anderson, 2023).

RPPs Suited to Address Educator Diversity

Although RPPs show promise, current research on RPPs focused specifically on advancing educator diversity is limited. NCRED aims to close the gap in both research and practice by focusing on the study of educator diversity RPP practices across the RPP Lab. One intended output will be new knowledge about how to develop effective collaborations among a network of educators, thought leaders, researchers, and community leaders focused on advancing educator diversity. The Lab builds on a strong foundation of research about RPPs, seeking to understand challenges related specifically to educator diversity such as:

- What conditions enable researchers, educators, and community members to join together in creative exploration and generative conflict?
- What practices enliven a healing consciousness in RPPs focused on educator diversity?

- What infrastructure supports RPPs to endure and change as communities change?
- What design features of RPPs best position them to create effective, community-centered educator diversity interventions?

From current research, NCREd developed an initial theory of change (see Table 1) outlining how RPPs can be used to circumvent current systems of harm in schools, communities, and institutions of higher education to radically reimagine teacher development systems for marginalized and minoritized educators and students.

This theory of change serves as a roadmap for the RPP Lab, and it is a first step forward for the field toward developing measures and being able to answer the above questions. As captured in this theory of change, a potential strength of RPPs is fostering a more equitable and sustainable approach to advancing ethnoracial educator diversity that diffuses power structures and relations among education reformers, policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and community members. Practitioners and community members are rarely engaged as leaders and innovators for teacher development initiatives (Gist, 2022); if they are involved, they may not be included in important decision-making processes (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). As noted in the theory of change, RPPs that confront the challenge of radically reimagining power structures and relations, and navigate the volatile sociopolitical environments in which they may be situated, can advance tactics (e.g., cultivating healing and wellness, developing shared language and critical literacy, and developing nondominant research measures) that work toward creating an opportunity for ethnoracially diverse teacher development systems to be intentionally built and iteratively nurtured.

For instance, an RPP may decide to create a teacher initiative focused on recruiting Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) school-affiliated staff (e.g., cafeteria workers, bus drivers, crossing guards) from the community to support economic mobility in the community. School staff positions are typically racialized and gendered in pronounced ways, and there could be a range of intersectional standpoints for consideration with this group of workers related to immigration, language, and family status, in addition to grappling with the sociopolitical community context of limited social service resources and histories of economic divestment. In this case, the principle of relationality is vital because community voice, representation, and agency within the RPP must be radically reimaged to remap power relations for those groups, and uplift and support empowerment in ways that invest in and advance community goals (Gist, 2022). Though complex, it represents a core outcome of our theory of change, which is to develop effective practices and sustainable infrastructure for advancing ethnoracial educator diversity in local contexts.

A Call to Action

In the NCREd Educator Diversity RPP Lab we are challenging ourselves as a body of researchers, practitioners, and community members to collectively engage in freedom

Table 1. The National Center for Research on Educator Diversity (NCRED) Theory of Change for Research Practice Partnership.

<p>PURPOSE: The Educator Diversity RPP Lab is an experimental context for developing RPP models on educator diversity and implementing research directives from the <i>Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers</i> (Gist & Bristol, 2022). It is a national effort to apply knowledge about how to authentically center equity in RPPs by building community among partnerships aimed at strengthening the ethnoracial diversity of educators in their localized contexts.</p>			
<p>Current State</p> <p>1. Educator ethnoracial diversity has a positive impact on student learning and achievement, particularly among underrepresented groups (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Shirrell et al., 2021).</p> <p>2. Progress toward diversifying the educator workforce remains slow due to a fracture between research and practice (Farrell et al., 2021; Gist & Bristol, 2022).</p> <p>3. The Lab seeks to build a community of scholars and practitioners committed to systematically bridging that divide by organizing RPPs.</p>	<p>Strengths And Challenges</p> <p>1. RPPs are complex organizational endeavors that are resource intensive (Booker, 2023). Still, they have the potential to create a space for generative conflict and co-design that results in more effective interventions (Anderson, 2023; Shimaru et al., 2019). There are growing funding opportunities at both federal and state levels to support grow-your-own programs and residency models that advance ethnoracial diversity.</p> <p>2. RPPs focused on advancing educator diversity must navigate sociopolitical climates that are volatile and, often, hostile. RPP leaders and members learn to grapple with differing ideologies, practices, and approaches to partnering and governance, and developing shared language across various cultures (Anderson, 2023).</p> <p>3. RPPs can offer the organizational structure needed for sustained collaboration across institutions, but they can also reinscribe harm in research and practice if they are not community centered and equity driven. RPPs can foster a regenerative and liberatory culture among researchers, educators, and community members by diffusing power relations and designing equitable structures for change (Anderson, 2023; Patel, 2015).</p>	<p>Strategies and Tactics</p> <p>For each of the strategies below, there are necessary tactics at both the macro systems level and the level of practice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultivating healing and wellness in RPP formation and ongoing development - Radical reimagining of community engagement and roles in RPP - Bridging relational differences and developing shared language - Strengthening racial literacy and critical perspectives - Centering equity to address problems of practice - Varied and nondominant data sources that illuminate community, teacher, parent, and student voices - Practically applying and generating research to inform policy, practice, and infrastructure development - Intentional and sustainable funding - Engagement with relevant and responsive policy intermediaries and makers 	<p>Desired Outcomes</p> <p>1. Strong RPPs that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) grounded in justice and equity principles; (b) community formed, centered, engaged and driven; (c) humanizing and sustaining research communities of practice; and (d) experiencing ongoing iterative refinement and radical reimagination for the common and public good <p>2. Clear and effectual practices, policies, and sustainable infrastructure for advancing ethnoracial educator diversity in local contexts through RPPs</p> <p>3. New developments in (a) knowledge about how to apply research knowledge about educator diversity into practice and (b) increased knowledge about how to establish and operate RPPs focused on increasing ethnoracial diversity of educators</p>

dreaming about the types of educational futures possible in schools and districts committed to advancing educator diversity. Presently, we are setting up the foundations for learning together and charting a new research agenda that builds and sustains RPPs focused on educator diversity. To do this, we intend to develop criteria and measures for healthy, thriving RPPs focused on educator diversity to share with the field, and use the tools we create to support collaborative research models committed to engineering more equitable teaching and learning systems. We hope you will consider joining us as colleagues and critical friends to generate and advance meaningful and impactful research approaches to advance educator diversity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Anderson, E. (2023). Political considerations for establishing research practice partnerships in pursuit of equity: Organizations, projects, and relationships. *Educational Policy*, 37(1), 77–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048221130993>
- Bang, M., & Vossoughi, S. (2016). Participatory design research and educational justice: Studying learning and relations within social change making. *Cognition and Instruction*, 34(3), 173–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2016.1181879>
- Booker, A. (2023). Designing for a productive politics of participation in research practice partnerships. *Educational Policy*, 37(1), 225–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089590482211345>
- Cochran-Smith, M., Carney, M. C., Keefe, E. S., Burton, S., Chang, W., Fernandez, M. B., Miller, A. F., Sanchez, J. G., & Baker, M. (2018). *Reclaiming accountability in teacher education*. Teachers College Press.
- Dee, T. (2004). Teachers, race and student achievement in a randomized experiment. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86(1), 195–210. <https://doi.org/10.1162/003465304323023750>
- Diamond, J. B. (2021, July 19). *Racial equity and research practice partnerships 2.0: A critical reflection*. William T. Grant Foundation. <https://wtgrantfoundation.org/racial-equity-and-research-practice-partnerships-2-0-a-critical-reflection>
- Farrell, C. C., Penuel, W. R., Coburn, C., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). *Research-practice partnerships in education: The state of the field*. William T. Grant Foundation.
- Gershenson, S., Hart, C. M., Hyman, J., Lindsay, C., & Papageorge, N. W. (2018). *The long-run impacts of same-race teachers* (No. w25254). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Gist, C. D. (2022). The community teacher: How can we radically reimagine power relations in teacher development? *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 55(4), 342–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2022.2137611>
- Gist, C. D., & Bristol, T. J. (2022). *Handbook of research on teachers of color and indigenous teachers*. American Educational Research Association.

- Grissom, J. A., & Redding, C. (2016). Discretion and disproportionality: Explaining the under-representation of high-achieving students of color in gifted programs. *AERA Open*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858415622175>
- Henrick, E. C., Cobb, P., Penuel, W. R., Jackson, K., & Clark, T. (2017). *Assessing research-practice partnerships*. <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/10/Assessing-Research-Practice-Partnerships.pdf>
- Ishimaru, A. M., Bang, M., Valladares, M. R., Nolan, C. M., Tavares, H., Rajendran, A., & Chang, K. (2019). *Recasting families and communities as co-designers of education in tumultuous times*. National Education Policy Center. <https://scholar.colorado.edu/nepc/413/>
- Ishimaru, A. M., Barajas-López, F., Sun, M., Scarlett, K., & Anderson, E. (2022). Transforming the role of RPPs in remaking educational systems. *Educational Researcher*, 51(7), 465–473. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221098077>
- Kelley, R. D. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination*. Beacon Press.
- National Center for Research on Educator Diversity. (2022). *Diversifying the educator workforce: Advancing equity*. <https://thencred.org>
- Patel, L. (2015). *Decolonizing educational research: From ownership to answerability*. Routledge.
- Shirrell, M., Bristol, T. J., & Britton, T. A. (2021). *The effects of student-teacher ethnoraacial matching on exclusionary discipline for Asian American, Black, and Latinx students: Evidence from New York City*. EdWorkingPaper No. 21-475. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.
- Welsh, R. O. (2021). Assessing the quality of education research through its relevance to practice: An integrative review of research-practice partnerships. *Review of Research in Education*, 45(1), 170–194. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X20985082>
- William, T. Grant Foundation. (2023, May 12). *Research-practice partnerships*. <https://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org>

Author Biographies

Dr. Conra D. Gist is an Associate Professor of Teaching and Teacher Education at the University of Houston, College of Education. Her research works to understand and foster humanizing and just educational programs, policies, and practices that support the development and advancement of marginalized and minoritized groups.

Emma Parkerson is a cofounder and consultant at Systems Design Lab. Her work focuses on convening groups across departmental, organizational, and system boundaries to advance collective good in communities.

Ke Wu is a cofounder and consultant at Systems Design Lab. Anchored in a commitment to advocacy and grassroots change, her work focuses on studying and radically redesigning systems so they better meet the needs of those they seek to serve.