

# Racial Equity and Research Practice Partnerships 2.0: A Critical Reflection

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In *Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: The State of the Field*, Farrell et al. (2021) highlight ways that RPPs have evolved over the past eight years to develop a more explicit focus on system improvement and transformation and to include a broader range of actors and institutions. Still, as a sociologist of race and educational organizations, I recognize that RPPs are an organizational approach, not an equity strategy. Collaborations among school districts and universities can produce just as much harm as good. Therefore, to work for positive change, those engaged in RPPs need to foreground power and racial justice and intentionally design partnerships that challenge various forms of oppression.<sup>1</sup> In short, RPPs must confront the *institutional histories, power asymmetries, and racialized organizational processes* that shape them. By taking this approach, the field will increase the likelihood that RPPs challenge oppressive systems rather than reproduce them.

## **Institutional Histories**

Universities and school districts have often perpetuated racial injustice. This reality must be reckoned with if those engaged in RPPs hope to contribute to enhanced racial justice. Universities have histories tied to White supremacy and settler colonialism that form the backdrop on which RPPs are built. Higher education institutions in the United States have histories involving land theft, racial oppression, and ethnic cleansing (expulsion and murder). For example, following an 1832 treaty, White racial actors (with support from the federal government) forcibly removed members of the Ho-Chunk Nation from their land (“Teejop”) on which the University of Wisconsin, my campus office, and the city of Madison now sit (Peek, 2019).

The fraught relationships between universities and local communities are not just relics of the past. While universities often bring economic resources to communities, some also bring gentrification, increased housing inequality, and

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<sup>1</sup> I foreground racial oppression in this discussion, however, I recognize that various forms of oppression interlock in a matrix of domination. Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

large police forces, all of which are detrimental to the minoritized and working-class communities that surround them (Baldwin, 2021). The nature of these relationships is clearly documented in critical community-engaged scholarship,<sup>2</sup> to which RPPs are indebted (often without acknowledgement). Of course, universities have also produced scholarship supportive of systemic racial oppression and have failed to root out racial discrimination on their campuses. Such historic and contemporary relationships are repeated across the higher education landscape and shape how universities are perceived.

As with universities, K-12 educational institutions have played contradictory roles in the lives of students and families. Schools are seen by many as the best hope for social mobility and economic viability for their children, but have also perpetuated White supremacy (Diamond, 2018), been sites of racial contestation, and played a key role in the criminalization of minoritized youth (Shedd, 2015; Hirschfield, 2008). Our RPP models need to confront these realities head-on to build trusting relationships that challenge oppressive systems instead of reproducing them.

### **Power Asymmetries Among Institutions and Actors**

RPP practitioners present RPPs as democratizing organizational forms. However, the institutional field in which RPPs are embedded are riddled with power asymmetries. Bringing groups and institutions with unequal power together, without acknowledging that unequal power, is a recipe for continued domination. Universities often wield more power than K-12 school districts, researchers usually have more institutional power than school-based educators, and university faculty and educators often have power over residents in local working-class and minoritized communities. While those working in RPPs often seek to challenge such hierarchies, this aspiration and the unfolding reality are often at odds. Unfortunately, the same deficit-oriented, paternalistic, and colonial relationships can exist in RPPs that exist in other forms of research. We need to avoid assuming that racial justice will rise to the surface simply through a stated commitment to it and instead work to root out biases that lead to detrimental approaches.

It is also true that the institutions in these collaborations often have interests that run counter to racial justice, a situation that can lead them to undermine work that challenges their perceived interests. I have personally witnessed RPPs avoid politically difficult research questions even when the answers to those questions could be vital to school improvement. I have also seen young people silenced when their RPP based Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects veered too close to unearthing unflattering realities of racialized discipline practices in schools (Lac & Fine, 2018). The publicly stated commitments to these partnerships that bring good will to participating institutions need to be backed up in practice.

<sup>2</sup> See Warren, M. R., Diamond, J. B., Eatman, T., Fine, M., Glass, R. D. (Eds.) (2018). *Research confronts equity and social justice: Building the emerging field of collaborative, community engaged education research*. *Urban Education*, 53(4), 439-444.

**Institutional Partners as Racialized Organizations**

Racial oppression is reproduced through normal functioning of racialized organizations, including schools and universities (Ray, 2019). In schools, for example, anti-Black racism has been demonstrated in teachers' evaluation of student academic work, academic abilities, and classroom behaviors, as well as discipline processes, school policing practices, and course-level recommendations. The list of these documented racialized processes could fill this entire reflection and cut across various organizational contexts. In other words, core organizational routines are racialized (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This is in no small part because the vast majority of those in powerful positions in all of these institutions are White (e.g., teachers, administrators, school board members, university faculty and administrators, legislators, etc.).

However, RPPs often avoid engagement with critical racial perspectives, instead relying on more mainstream frameworks that view racial inequity as the exception rather than the rule. I am convinced that these truncated theoretical foundations need to be reexamined if RPPs seek to live up to their transformative aspirations. With the current attack on critical race theory and the 1619 project for challenging White supremacy, and the efforts to consolidate White power through making it more difficult to vote, the urgency of this moment could not be clearer. If we cannot deal honestly with the organizations that make up RPPs as they are, the quest for racial justice will remain elusive.

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In sum, RPPs have the potential to forge relationships that lead to new possibilities for racial justice. However, they also run the risk of reproducing the very inequities that many claim to challenge. To avoid the second scenario, we need to confront racial injustice directly and build RPPs that are committed to dismantling it.

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