

# Research-Practice Partnerships for Racially Just School Communities

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For too long the academy has espoused the belief that the best type of research is research conducted solely as an objective, university-based enterprise. This idea negates the talents and insights of non-academics who are also motivated to, and capable of, examining pressing societal problems systematically and ethically, not least those minoritized community members for whom such problems too often derive from systemic injustice.

But research-practice partnerships (RPPs) enable some of the most meaningful and influential research to be conducted collaboratively. By bringing together university researchers with practitioners and community members, RPPs in education, for example, help to ensure that the processes and outcomes of research directly enrich educational practice and policy in ways that community members most desire. Likewise, Farrell et al. (2021) specify that RPPs “connect diverse forms of expertise and shift power relations in the research endeavor.” The authors contend that RPPs not only pursue research to build and share knowledge, as traditional university research does, they also seek to foster “educational improvement or equitable transformation” (2021, p.05). Indeed, the action-oriented, egalitarian, and agentic characteristics of RPPs make them ripe for advancing educational equity and racial justice when explicitly designed, implemented, and continuously adapted to do so.

For example, as an RPP principal investigator, I have had the privilege of co-designing and coordinating the action-oriented and antiracist Urban Learning and Leadership Collaborative (ULLC),<sup>1</sup> funded by the Spencer Foundation. The ULLC is a networked, intergenerational RPP that unites researchers from the University of Michigan, Wayne State University, and the Detroit-based civil rights organization Focus: Hope to facilitate the Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline (DSTOPP) alliance. The DSTOPP alliance links four predominantly African

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://soe.umich.edu/grants-awards/urban-learning-leadership-collaborative-leveraging-community-based-research-alliance>

# Reflection

American community-based action research teams that are composed of youth and community practitioner researchers, as well as additional university researchers from Eastern Michigan, Michigan State University, and Wayne State University. Altogether, teams examine school-to-prison pipeline dynamics and draw upon data, including feedback from educators, students, and families, to develop school community resources (e.g., curriculum, professional development, extracurricular programming, restorative justice initiatives, etc.) that counter the criminalization and harming of Black youth in Detroit schools by promoting educational equity, freedom, and social justice. The wisdom and contributions of the youth researchers—aligned with the emancipatory ideals of antiracist collaborative research—are especially inspiring. Detroit community residents, most of whom are African American elders who helped determine the RPP’s single priority focus, advise the ULLC–DSTOPP alliance.

Our individual teams are methodologically diverse, yet the RPP is grounded in a core antiracist theory of change that is community-driven and university-supported. Partners and research team members participate in regular meetings and seasonal retreats for team building, information sharing, and critical reflection. To minimize conflict and uphold the values and goals of operating an equitable RPP, we strive to be mindful of our differing positionalities and our varied yet equally valuable knowledge, skills, and social networks. Our shared commitments, effort, trust, and care ultimately propel us forward and enhance the gratifying nature our partnership.

This work exemplifies the power, potential, and importance of RPPs that are consciously constructed for transformative and antiracist purposes—an intent that will hopefully drive future RPPs in education and in numerous other fields. Indeed, persistent inequities and instantiations of racial injustice in education warrant the increased use of RPPs as justice-driven vehicles for educational change. Based on my experience co-leading education RPPs with community organizers, civil rights advocates, and leaders of community-based organizations, this means specifying and operationalizing antiracist objectives; engaging people of color (in and outside the academy) as full research partners; embracing liberatory aims and epistemologies that are community-centered and derived from those who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and/or of Asian descent; and constructing equitable partnership roles. It also requires regularly evaluating and adjusting RPP structures, relationships, inquiry methods, and outcomes so they are as humanizing, beneficial, and disruptive of the status quo as possible.

Beyond the internal processes and principles of the partnership itself, the broader institutional infrastructure is also influential to a partnership’s ability to create change. University resources should be marshalled in decolonizing ways by leveraging RPP funding, academic personnel, and university status and space in ways that affirm, respect, and empower marginalized communities and people of color on their terms. Such practice avoids exploiting community members’ labor or appropriating and commodifying their knowledge, land, and space (Guishard, 2009; Patel, 2016; Tuck, 2009) as many university-led research endeavors have historically done. Taking these steps also prompts justice-driven and antiracist

RPPs to be collaborations in which partners reject the idea that research can be purely objective and apolitical. Thus, partners renounce dominant conceptions and assessments of education “achievement,” “discipline,” “standards,” and “accountability” that demean the intelligence, strengths, and needs of children of color and systematically alienates, criminalizes, and fails them.

Of course, critical and racially-conscious approaches to collaborative research are not new. Rather they are imbued by participatory action research traditions that predate institutionalized RPPs and stem from the justice-driven inquiry and political movements of people of color in the U.S. and abroad (Dixon, James, & Freison, 2019). But by building on these foundations and fusing the perspectives and expertise of community members and university researchers in sustained collaborations that reach toward justice, RPPs may well represent a key evolution of the research enterprise.

# Reflection

## References

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