



The Future of Children

Princeton - Brookings

Research-Practice Partnership Brief

Crisis Response, Racial Equity Capacity Building: Lessons from one Research-Practice Partnership

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This brief describes a research-practice partnership formed to scale ParentCorps as part of New York City's Pre-K for All initiative (launched in 2014 to provide free, full-day, high-quality pre-kindergarten for all four-year-olds) and ThriveNYC (launched in 2016 as a city-wide mental health initiative). ParentCorps is an evidence-based enhancement to pre-K to reduce racial and income disparities in children's educational and mental health outcomes. The RPP brought together two organizations: the Center for Early Childhood Health and Development at NYU Grossman School of Medicine (where ParentCorps is based) and the Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) of the NYC Department of Education. In contrast to the typical "handing off" of evidence-based programs to the system, this partnership provided an opportunity to achieve meaningful impact at scale: as part of the RPP, ParentCorps developers, implementation leaders, and researchers sat alongside policy and practice leaders of the nation's largest school district over five-plus years to engage collaboratively on issues of implementation, evaluation, and improvement of systems-level policies and practice.

In reflecting on the potential for RPPs to build better and more equitable ECE systems, we are motivated by John Diamond's 2021 critique: "RPPs often avoid engagement with critical racial perspectives... 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."¹

Throughout our partnership, both organizations invested in racial equity capacity-building. Examples include: research-practice partners engaging in racial equity training, including personally developing the consciousness and skills needed to recognize and interrupt racism in ourselves and others; the DECE investing in training from Courageous Conversations (a protocol for interracial dialogue) for pre-K educators; and ParentCorps strengthening content to scaffold educators in examining their own implicit racial bias and increasing awareness of the extent to which they may be acting on biases in their daily interactions with children and families.

The RPP has provided a context for the critical examination of pre-K policy and practice, with equity as a shared goal. Early on, stakeholders collaborated to build the rationale for prioritizing the DECE's annual allocation of programmatic supports (including a tiered model of ParentCorps)

in pre-K programs serving large portions of children living in poverty. Similarly, during the pandemic's early months, research-practice partners moved nimbly to assess family and educator needs and provide pandemic-responsive supports to pre-K programs in the 27 zip codes hardest hit by COVID-19. This included training early childhood social workers to facilitate Parenting through the Pandemic, a virtual program focused on grief, loss, and creating predictability for children in uncertain times, adapted from ParentCorps's program for families.

As we—ParentCorps developers, implementation leaders, and researchers—reflect on the privilege of being “at the table” with policy makers, we are eager to advance the RPP more fully, in these ways:

- Involve families, educators, early childhood social workers, and community stakeholders so that those most impacted by structural inequities can drive how we identify policy and practice solutions.
- Build the evidence base showing the impact of racial equity training (at personal, professional, and organizational levels).
- Examine systemic barriers to sustained investment in mental health in ECE programs and schools (see Table 1).

Table 1. How a Deeper Investment in Mental Health Could Look in Early Childhood Education*

<i>Engaging in systems thinking</i>	<p>In what ways does systemic racism constrict funding for mental health and perpetuate beliefs about the need to <i>control</i> rather than <i>nurture</i> children?</p> <p>Contrast the investment nationwide in school police officers vs. mental health professionals: 14 million students are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, social worker, or psychologist; and 90% of students are in schools that fail to meet minimum professional standards (e.g., one social worker for every 250 students).²</p> <p>Consider the role of race and racism in RPP discussions about the untenable caseloads of mental health professionals and the inevitable dilution of their impact.</p>
<i>Learning, improving, and innovating</i>	<p>What insights can ECE mental health professionals offer to solve the challenges faced by large numbers of children, families, and educators, and how might these professionals envision their role in a “whole child, whole school” approach to supporting social-emotional wellness?</p> <p>Apply improvement science and participatory methods to learn with and honor the practice, expertise, and lived experience of ECE mental health professionals who are primarily of women of color in most large districts across the U.S.</p>
<i>Centering parent voices, especially the voices of parents of color</i>	<p>What role do parents want ECE systems to play in meeting their children's mental health needs? How are parents experiencing pandemic policies, such as universal social-emotional screening?</p> <p>Expand RPPs to include parents and community stakeholders as partners, learning from participatory and action-oriented collaboratives that tap into collective knowledge and resources.^{3,4}</p>
<i>Understanding the needs and priorities of pre-K leaders, teachers, mental health professionals, and staff</i>	<p>What kind of professional learning and support would educators choose in the context of the pandemic and the renewed reckoning for racial justice?</p> <p>Consider research demonstrating the value of communal coping for educators who are experiencing trauma in their students' lives^{5,6} and the need for an entirely new approach to supporting educators' mental health and wellness.^{7,8}</p> <p>Elevate mixed methods research to understand educators' experiences and shape the approach to community-building, healing, and support, particularly guided by humanizing and feminist theoretical perspectives.</p>

* Adapted from ParentCorps's Principles for RPP Work⁹

1 John B. Diamond. Racial Equity and Research Practice Partnerships 2.0: A Critical Reflection. William T. Grant Foundation, 2021. <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/racial-equity-and-research-practice-partnerships-2-0-a-critical-reflection>

2 Cops and No Counselors: How the lack of school mental health staff is harming students. American Civil Liberties Union. <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>

3 Community Research Collaborative. (2021). In it together: Community-based research guidelines for communities and higher education. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah. <https://partners.utah.edu/new-report-research-partnerships/>

4 East Harlem Action Collaborative for Child Health and Well-being. <https://www.nyam.org/ehac/>

5 R. Gabriela Barajas-Gonzalez. Early care and education workforce stress and needs in a restrictive, anti-immigrant climate. Urban Institute Research Report, 2021. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/early-care-and-education-workforce-stress-and-needs-restrictive-anti-immigrant-climate>

6 R. Gabriela Barajas-Gonzalez et al. "You're part of some hope and then you fall into despair": A mixed-method study of the impact of the 2016 Presidential election and ensuing immigration climate on the work and well-being of educators and school-based mental health professionals in Latinx immigrant communities. Manuscript under review.

7 Vanessa Rodriguez et al. With Awareness Comes Competency: The Five Awarenesses of Teaching as a Framework for Understanding Teacher Social-Emotional Competency and Well-being. Early Education and Development, 31 (2020): 940-972, DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2020.1794496

8 Vanessa Rodriguez et al. Silent Expectations: An exploration of female pre-Kindergarten teachers' mental health and wellness during Covid-19 and beyond. Early Childhood Research Quarterly. 60 (2021): 80-95. DOI: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.12.006 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34955598/>

9 Laurie Brotman et al (2021). Scaling Early Childhood Evidence-Based Interventions through RPPs. Future of Children 31 (2021): 57-74, https://futureofchildren.princeton.edu/sites/futureofchildren/files/foc_combined_5.3.21.pdf