

## Equity and social justice in research practice partnerships in the United States

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### **Abstract:**

Research–practice partnerships (RPPs) have grown rapidly in the last decade in the United States to challenge traditional notions of education research by emphasizing the importance of researchers and practitioners working together in a spirit of mutuality to develop research questions, collect data, implement interventions, and analyze and use findings. RPP scholarship in the United States has historically advocated for the need to pay more focused attention to issues of equity and justice. To address that need, this literature review examined how RPPs in the United States have addressed equity and justice in their work. Based on five dimensions of equity and justice that could be observed within the 149 examples of RPP work we reviewed, we identified 17 exemplar projects that explicitly and effectively forefront equity and justice in RPPs, what we call equity-focused. Implications suggest that researchers and practitioners who have initiated equity-orientated RPPs may reflect on the partnerships’ existing strengths, specifically related to the five interconnected features that characterize equity-focused RPPs, to sustain and advance equity and justice through RPPs.

**Keywords:** diversity | equity | meta-analysis | social justice | research-practice partnerships | RPPs

### **Article:**

Research–practice partnerships (RPPs) have challenged traditional notions of education research by emphasizing the importance of researchers and practitioners working together in a spirit of mutuality to develop research questions, collect data, implement interventions, and analyze and use findings (Coburn et al., 2013). RPP scholarship in the United States has grown rapidly in the last decade with an increasing number of grant-funded projects. For example, the Spencer Foundation includes RPP as a research grant category and funded 22 RPP projects between 2015 and 2018, with up to \$400,000 for each project. Also, the Institute for Educational Sciences sponsored RPP research competitions from 2013 to 2019. Thus, RPP work has been valued by both private and federal funders.

Well designed and enacted, partners and stakeholders all benefit from the process by, for example, systematically codeveloping evidence-based solutions to address relevant problems of

practice within a school (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). RPPs, then, are long-term, mutualistic collaborations between practitioners and researchers that are organized intentionally to investigate problems of practice (Coburn et al., 2013; Tseng, 2017). RPPs have many benefits, such as a commitment to long-term partnerships, producing rigorous practice-embedded research, and improving learning and instruction in schools. RPPs also experience challenges, such as ineffective communication (Nelson et al., 2015), limited resources (Coburn et al., 2013), omission of important stakeholders (Klar et al., 2018; Pollock, 2013), and inequitable power dynamics (Penuel et al., 2015). The goal of ensuring mutuality is a difficult one when power imbalances between and among stakeholders can create bureaucratic, cultural, political, and practical barriers to progress at every step.

Although RPPs have many commonalities, they also have noteworthy distinctions among forms and functions of the partnership, including the structure (e.g., differing partner configurations), interactions (e.g., type and intensity of the work), and output (e.g., toolkits, codesigned curriculum, technical reports, policy briefs; NNERPP, n.d.). In this thematic review, we highlight commonly used RPP models in the United States, including the following: (a) research alliances (e.g., Scher et al., 2018), (b) design-based implementation research (DBIR; e.g., Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016), and (c) networked improvement communities (NICs; e.g., Barron et al., 2015). A research alliance includes a group of stakeholders (i.e., researchers, practitioners, and policymakers) who work together to improve educational outcomes typically related to policy and practice (Scher et al., 2018). For example, the goal of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools is to “advance equity and excellence in education by providing credible, nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote student success” (“Mission,” 2021). Specifically, the Center for Racial Justice in Education worked with the Research Alliance for New York City Schools to study improvement in policies and practices related to two core program offerings.

Design research partnerships (also known as design-based research partnerships [DBR] or design-based implementation research [DBIR]) involve all partners in the design and implementation of the research process, a central element to RPPs (Penuel et al., 2017). While a research alliance is typically related to policy and practice, design-based research has been most widely used in learning sciences. Teams “organize or ‘engineer’ new approaches to learning in order to study the conditions under which they can be supported” (Penuel et al., 2020, p. 639). The goal of the MIST Project, for example, is to support improvements to the quality of instruction in middle grades mathematics through a partnership between learning scientists, policy researchers, and leaders from four different districts (Cobb et al., 2013; Cobb & Jackson, 2011). Overall, MIST partners conducted systematic inquiry to develop theory related to improving the quality of instruction and learning at the system level.

NICs are networks of districts, schools, universities, or other organizations that work together to develop new approaches to problems within specific contexts (Barron et al., 2015; Bryk et al., 2011; Cannata et al., 2015). While design research partnerships tend to organize joint work for new approaches to learning, the overarching goal of NICs is to build a “collaborative research partnership that uses the principles of improvement science within networks of organizations to learn from varied implementation of new ideas across contexts” (Proger et al., 2017, p. 1). Like other RPPs, one goal for NICs is to build an infrastructure for education that supports

improvements in “outcomes reliably and at scale” (Penuel et al., 2020, p. 640). For example, Barron et al. (2015) discussed a NIC, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, called the Student Agency Improvement Community, where partners worked to scale up psychological interventions that enhance motivation for learning.

### **Purpose of the Literature Review**

The topic of equity is one that Henrick et al. (2019) argued is vital to current RPP work. This includes attention to equity in every phase, from setting initial priorities to communication strategies, timetables for work, expectations of outcomes, use of data and resources, voices in decision making and implementation, and respect for the strengths of each partner. Specifically, Henrick et al. (2019) listed three equity-focused goals that discuss the development of equitable relationships, support of equitable outcomes, and the development of equitable systems. However, long-standing power imbalances between researchers, practitioners, and community members can make this work challenging. Henrick et al. (2019) advocated for the need to pay more attention to issues of equity when assessing RPP effectiveness and to consider how to support equitable partnerships that “offer voice to those not currently being heard, work toward equitable outcomes for the students we serve, and design equitable systems that provide the training and resources for these collaborative activities to take place” (p. 13). To address this need, we engaged in this literature review to examine how RPPs in the United States have addressed equity and justice in their work, what we call equity-focused. We define *equity-focused* as RPPs that explicitly address issues of power and privilege that exist within communities, within the structures of RPPs, and within the problems of practice that partners are attempting to address. Our goal, then, is to provide support for those interested in addressing equity and justice in a critical and intentional way (equity-focused) in their future RPP projects. We focused this review on U.S. RPPs because definitions of RPP vary markedly across international spaces; in the United States, however, researchers have adopted Coburn et al.’s (2013) definition of RPP that provided common language for RPP scholars. More details about our inclusion and exclusion criteria are in the Methods section. Before discussing definitions of equity and justice, we provide a brief history of the long-standing quest for equity and justice through partnerships in the United States.

### **The Evolution of RPPs: A Long-Standing Quest for Advancing Equity and Social Justice**

Although varied, definitions of and calls for collaboration among researchers and practitioners have appeared in the extant literature for over 70 years. Published in 1946, Lewin’s “Action Research and Minority Problems” disrupted the notion of an expert-driven research and development model by proffering that social science is social engineering. As such, Lewin (1946) argued that all social science research should be conceptualized and carried out with participants—a revolutionary assertion that foreshadowed contemporary RPP research (Goldstein et al., 2019). Specifically, Lewin (1946) argued the need for social scientists to undertake a cyclical approach to research based on co-planning, co-acting, and co-investigating results—a process akin to present-day plan-do-study-act cycles, which serve as a framework for educational change guided by improvement science (Lewis, 2015) and as an integral aspect of DBR and DBIR (Penuel et al., 2011).

## The Emergence of Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Two to three decades post Lewin (1946), PAR (with its roots in critical theory and feminism) emerged in work with individuals who were oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised by various systemic, organizational, political, societal, and economic forces (Brown & Tandon, 1983) not only internationally (Freire, 1970; Hall, 1981) but also nationally (Horton, 1989; Maguire, 1987). While Lewin (1946) is credited with action research that is grounded in the profession, Freire (1970) is hailed for the origins of emancipatory research that is grounded in the community—the latter of which is a hallmark of PAR (Hacker, 2013). Hall (1981) described PAR as a three-pronged process consisting of research, education, and action. Drawing on Marxist, feminist, and/or critical theorists (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Brydon-Miller, 1997), pioneering PAR researchers boldly undertook social change, namely, human liberation, through various forms of inquiry (Freire, 1970; Horton, 1989; Maguire, 1987). Because of the explicit nature of researchers' positionality in pursuing social justice and human liberation, at the time, PAR was considered a radical alternative to traditional forms of research (Brydon-Miller, 1997).

## The Emergence of RPPs

Almost five decades post Lewin (1946), Sroufe (1997) underscored the need to improve the “awful reputation of education research” (p. 26), in part, through increased researcher–practitioner cooperation. Wagner (1997) offered a framework for “direct” researcher–practitioner cooperation formed, in part, on data extraction agreements, partnerships, colearning agreements, and inquiry roles—the latter of which entailed greater equity by viewing both researchers *and* practitioners as agents *and* objects of inquiry. Glaser et al. (1997) further described a framework for establishing partnerships between researchers and practitioners, urging 21st-century education researchers not only to learn from established experts (e.g., Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Howard Gardner, Lisa Delpit, Lee Shulman) but also from the “voices of school-based educators” and other key stakeholders (p. 25).

More recently, in the evolution of Lewin's (1946) trailblazing and radical attempt to transform traditional, researcher-governed approaches into shared educational inquiry, the phrase research–practice partnership came into use. In education, the term was codified by Penuel et al. (2013) to reflect a particular type of partnership—one that is long-term, focused on a problem of practice, mutualistic, intentionally using strategies to cultivate the partnership, and producing original analyses. Based on the assertion that even extraordinarily successful research often lacked sustained use in schools, Penuel and Gallagher (2017) further argued that RPPs not only bridged the research to practice gap but also addressed long-standing research and development infrastructure issues by creating partnerships that allowed researchers to “stick around” and work with educators to identify “local” problems of practice as well as solutions.

Given that “local” systems, needs, ideologies, priorities, and commitments often vary markedly, RPPs could be enacted in ways that are deeply conscious of power and equity or in ways that acknowledge but do not fully attend to equity issues. Like past and current pursuits of action researchers, some RPP scholars and practitioners have undertaken partnerships, concerned, in part, by a growing recognition of long-standing educational, health, and life inequities. The

extant RPP literature spans a variety of disciplines, including, but not limited to, public health (Baker et al., 1999), social work (Mullen, 2002), school psychology (Power et al., 2005), school mental health (Garland et al., 2006), adult mental health (Riemer et al., 2012), criminal justice (Hansen et al., 2014), child welfare and child mental health (Palinkas et al., 2017), medicine (Nyström et al., 2018), business (Rybnicek & Königsgruber, 2019), and education (Penuel, 2017). In education, RPP equity-focused work seeks to “move entire school systems toward greater equity, reducing disparities related to race and ethnicity, social class, gender and sexual identity, disability status, and other dimensions of inequality” (Farrell et al., 2021, p. 7).

## A Focus on RPPs

RPPs, a relative newcomer on the educational scene, are inclusive of collaborative characteristics of PAR and action research, but are not consistently centered on issues of power and equity. This confirms an ongoing need to investigate how RPPs address structural, organizational, systemic, and cultural complexities to reduce underlying inequities and advance social justice (Penuel, 2017). More recently, as underscored by Farrell et al. (2019), a need also exists for RPP researchers to be conscious of and detail specifically how they have attended to the dynamics inherent in carrying out different types of RPPs, disrupted long-standing power differentials between researchers and practitioners, and improved the educational and life outcomes experienced by key stakeholders (e.g., practitioners, students, families). Thus, we focus this literature review on how RPPs have addressed equity and justice to learn more about how these topics have been explored in past and current research. Given the support that foundations and governmental entities have thrown behind RPPs, we are focusing our review on those collaborations, and not extending the scope to PAR.

## Issues of Equity and Social Justice in U.S. Schools and RPPs

Equity and social justice as concepts are framed in the following sections, based on scholarship in the United States. We frame equity as being a necessary (but in itself insufficient) element of social justice. In other words, there can be no social justice without equity.

### Framing Equity

Equity involves multiple concepts, including allocating resources; honoring and leveraging assets; and sustaining culture, as described in the following sections.

#### *Allocating resources to meet student needs*

Equity is oftentimes defined as giving students the support they need to optimize their educational progress and maximize their potential, given historical exclusion and marginalization. Similarly, Henrick et al. (2019) defined equity as “allocating resources appropriately so every child has access to the supports, resources, and opportunities needed to be successful and thrive” (p. 8). In doing so, it is important to “recognize and honour differences and open doors of access and opportunity for everyone by redistributing resources and services” to those in greatest needs (Lalas et al., 2019, pp. 42–43).

### *Honoring and leveraging assets*

Equitable education also involves disrupting deficit perspectives and leveraging the strengths, cultural assets, and funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019) of students, families, groups, and communities (Henrick et al., 2019).

### *Providing culturally sustaining pedagogy*

In his foundational work, Paris (2012) introduced the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy as that which “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). The act of sustaining students’ diverse cultural and linguistic wealth ruptures the marginalization of minoritized people by the dominant, normalized culture. As such, equity “means offering relevant, appropriate, and meaningful school activities and strategies that are culturally and socially situated to meet” the needs of every student (Fortner et al., 2021, p. 5).

### Framing Social Justice

The aim of social justice is the “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Bell, 1997, p. 3). It involves the concepts of advancing equity; upholding the rights of students; identifying, critiquing, and addressing power and oppression; interrogating and disrupting “isms”; and including diverse perspectives, as detailed below.

### *Advancing equity*

A key element of social justice is advancing equity for all, as defined in the preceding section.

### *Upholding the rights of students*

Rights are routinely violated for students and groups who do not fit into White American middle-class, heterosexual, ableist, and English-speaking models, and these inequities are long-standing. In 1992, Kantor and Brenzel argued that after 25 years of national, state, and local efforts to address inadequacy of education for poor and minority students, education debt remained intractable, which is evident not only in achievement data but also in the disproportionality of discipline experienced by students of color (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Kolluri, 2018), as well as other educational outcomes, including college enrollment rates (NCES, 2020; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Almost three decades later, the same can be said (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015).

Upholding the rights of students requires disrupting the resegregation of schools (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020; Wells et al., 2019), addressing inequitable funding for students of poverty and students of color (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018), eliminating the inequitable distribution of effective teachers (Goldhaber et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2021; Sykes & Martin, 2019), and vanquishing microaggressions (Compton-Lilly, 2020).

### *Identifying, critiquing, and addressing power and oppression*

Disrupting systemic oppression of nondominant groups involves, for example, addressing implicit bias and inequitable power dynamics that perpetuate normative, taken-for-granted ideologies and othering that marginalizes particular students and groups (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995).

Social justice also involves recognizing and acting upon the power that individuals have for making positive change. Social justice education therefore “supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments” (Hackman, 2005, p. 103) that help students examine “social, political, and economic problems systemically and engage in collective strategies for change” (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011, p. 8). Thus, justice-oriented pedagogy focuses on teaching about power, oppression, and privilege and supporting others to make changes that promote equity (Bell, 1997; Hyttén & Bettez, 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

### *Interrogating and disrupting “isms.”*

Social justice “interrogates institutional racism and classism (among other -isms) and strives to provide equitable access to rich, high-quality educational opportunities for all students, not just a select, privileged few” (Groenke, 2010, p. 85). Social justice involves disrupting “isms” not just at the individual level but also at the *institutional level* (“laws, rules, processes, and organizations we use to engage in schooling” [Radd et al., 2021, p. 13]), the *structural level* (“The way our system of schooling, and our entire society for that matter, are built and organized predictably lead[s] to the types of disparate outcomes that exist today” [Radd et al., 2021, p. 12]), and *historical level* (deep roots of “isms” that go back centuries and are manifest today).

### *Including diverse voices*

Key but often invisible stakeholders in the community, such as minoritized families, need ways to communicate their needs and experiences with injustice and inequity (Pollock, 2013), so that educators and leaders hear stakeholders directly and are connected to the most relevant and pressing issues from the perspective of community members.

### Addressing Equity and Justice-Related Problems of Practice in U.S. Schools

Henrick et al. (2019) argued that RPPs can support equitable outcomes “by engaging in research that specifically investigates and addresses inequities faced by schools, districts, and states” (p. 8). The problem(s) of practice upon which RPPs focus can be issues of inequity in, for example, exclusionary discipline (in-school and out-of-school suspensions), underrepresentation of students of color in honors and advanced placement courses, as well as gifted programming, overrepresentation of students of color in special education, remedial courses, and so on. RPPs can also cultivate equitable systems by “reconceptualizing how research institutions, practice institutions, and communities work together for shared goals, removing barriers that limit progress, and building capacities for individuals and organizations to better collaborate” (Henrick et al., 2019, p. 8). This work can include addressing inequitable policies, processes, and practices at a systemic level, such as requiring parents/guardians to pay for private testing to

determine a student's eligibility for advanced learner programs or relying too heavily on teacher recommendations for access to advanced math in middle school. Such collaborative work can surface and address systems of power that marginalize and suppress. That said, even though educators work together to improve education for students in RPPs, dominant cultural norms in schools are often maintained, which continue to oppress marginalized communities or reproduce systemic inequities (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017).

### Issues of Equity and Social Justice in Partnerships

Equity-focused RPPs involve careful planning of who will be involved in the project and must explicitly address how activities, power, and responsibilities will be distributed and monitored, as well as how open communication will be maintained (Coburn et al., 2013). Differences among stakeholders can be addressed carefully by spending time on building trust (Rosenquist et al., 2015) focusing on common goals like quality data/evidence or other problems at the boundaries of the two systems, building joint infrastructure (Turley Stevens, 2015), bringing in various stakeholders to engage in "boundary crossing" (Penuel et al., 2013) or "linkage and exchange functions" (Paré-Blagoev & Booth, 2018), and having liaisons to communicate back to each stakeholder group (Martin et al., 2011). In addition, RPPs can increase their community engagement to expand their reach, especially when focused on equity issues (Anyon et al., 2017).

While many RPPs strive for the goal of equity, mutual collaboration is complicated because of the historical power relationships among the various parties involved. For example, members of RPPs have stated that their professional opinions were disregarded when attempting to collaboratively develop research protocols (Burk et al., 2018). Interventions, even when developed within an RPP with the intention of being a mutual collaboration, are "contested space filled with tensions and resistance from a range of stakeholders" (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014, p. 20). Thus, despite setting mutually beneficial and explicit goals and creating useful resources for the community, RPP participants may still make inequitable choices that require relationship repair if the partnership is to continue. In addition, when RPPs create partnerships with individuals and communities who have experienced marginalization because of their citizenship status, race/ethnicity, ability/disability, or socioeconomic standing, partners must be aware of how to acknowledge, include, and respect the lived experiences of such community partners (Wandersman et al., 2004). Ensuring mutuality means acknowledging these power differences and viewing them as learning opportunities rather than barriers.

### **Intentionally Advancing Equity and Social Justice Through RPPs**

As described, there remains a great need for more RPPs to directly address equity and social justice as a research and partnership issue (Farrell et al., 2019; Penuel, 2017; Penuel et al., 2020). That need is magnified by an increased sense of urgency spurred by current sociocultural events (including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic and its inequitable impacts on Black, Brown, disabled, and poor people, as well as increased violence against Asian Americans; the violence against Black bodies that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement; and the inhumane treatment of immigrants at the Southern U.S. border). Additionally, there is scant research on equity-focused RPPs to discern if they are more effective than other RPPs at ensuring equity and justice-related research partnership practices. Although a framework for

facilitating equity in RPP stakeholder conversations has been developed (Sexton et al., 2020), we could not locate a measure for what constitutes an effective RPP focused on equity and justice. Thus, to learn more about equity and justice in RPPs, we engaged in a thematic and systematic literature review that explored the following research question: In what ways have RPP researchers attended to equity and social justice? Specifically, within the broad understanding of equity and justice described above, we discuss the varied theories, frameworks, definitions, and methods related to equity and justice that researchers use in their RPP research. From this review, we suggest criteria for more purposeful grounding in equity and justice.

## Method

A thematic, systematic literature review is one that includes a “clear definition of the problem and hypotheses, careful selection of the studies, analysis of the studies selected by two independent reviewers, and detailed presentation of the results of the analysis in synthesized tables, if possible” (Soares et al., 2014, p. 338). Thus, by definition a literature review provides researchers and practitioners with a synthesis of what is currently known as well as unknown on a specific topic of interest (Booth et al., 2016), which in this case centers on synthesizing equity and social justice work in RPPs in the United States. The methods we used in carrying out this review, then, are suitable and necessary, and the findings can be used to guide all partners in advancing equity and social justice through RPP relationships, outcomes, and/or systems.

### Search Strategy

With a focus on RPP scholarship within the United States, we used the subject term “education” and keywords such as “research practice partnership,” “research-practice partnership,” and “researcher practitioner partnership” to identify relevant articles in the following academic databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, PsycINFO, PsycArticles, and Scopus. Publication time was limited to 2013 to 2019. We focused on studies published since 2013 because of Coburn et al.’s (2013) foundational work on RPP definition and characteristics. Specifically, this work not only named a specific kind of partnership work (research practice partnership), it also provided an explicit list of attributes that illustrated how RPPs are enacted. Since then, scholars, with the help of funding opportunities beginning in 2013 (e.g., Spencer Foundation, Institute of Education Sciences) have extended scholarship on RPPs in a variety of ways. Thus, most RPP publications in the United States occurred from 2013 and later (He et al., 2020). Prior to 2013, the work of RPPs was hard to identify because scholars used different language to describe those practices by drawing on discourses from their intellectual traditions. In addition, not everyone agreed on a definition of RPP work, making it hard to name and recognize, which resulted in scholars calling their work by many different names (e.g., partnership work). By excluding research prior to 2013, we inevitably miss some work that engages in RPP practices but does not name itself in that way. By focusing on articles from 2013 to 2019, however, we can be confident that the literature we reviewed consistently defines RPPs in the same way that is still being used today.

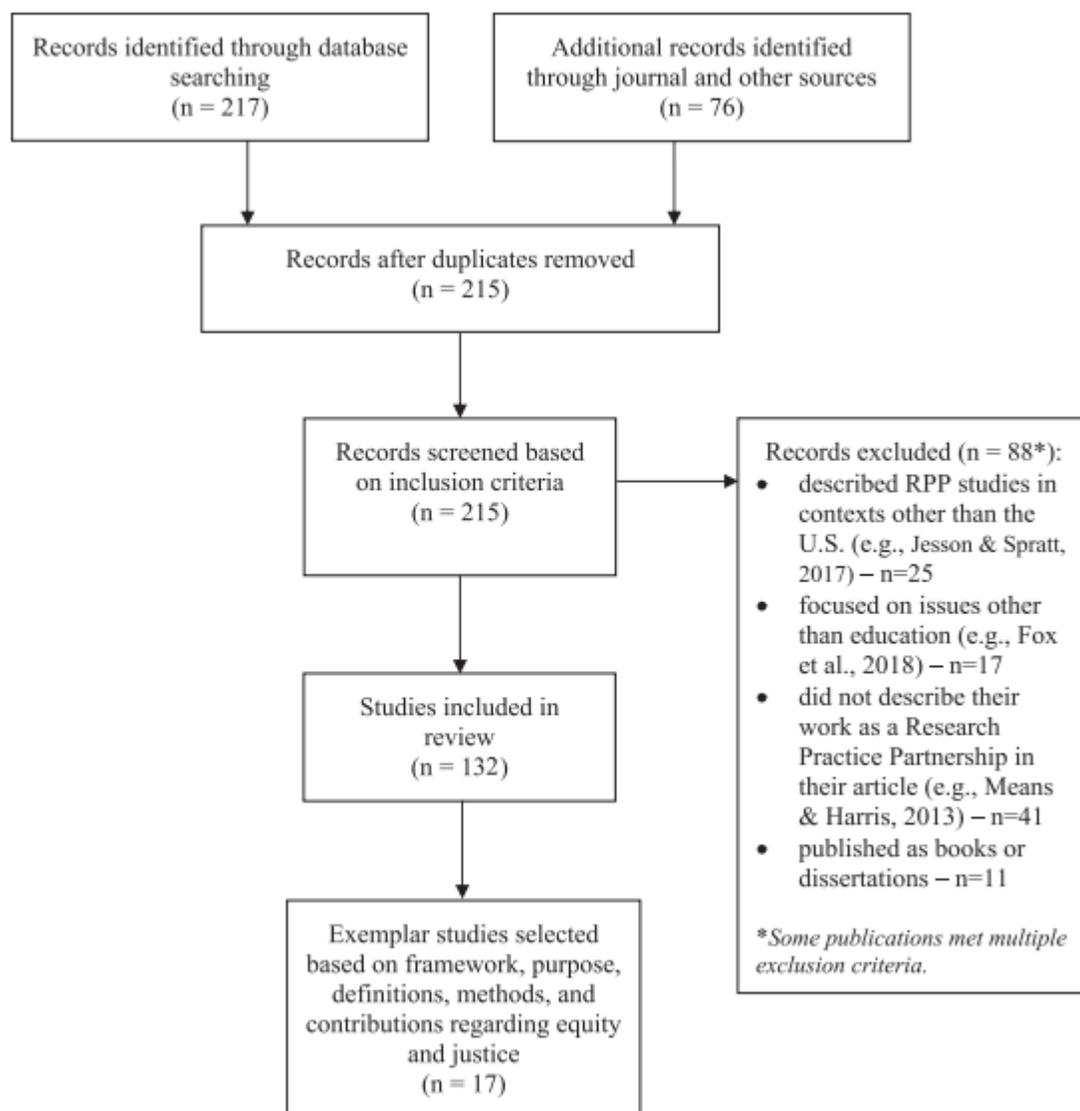
Based on the database search, a total of 217 records were identified. In addition to the database search, we also searched for RPP studies in leading educational journals such as *Educational Researcher*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *Journal*

*of Educational Psychology, Theory into Practice, Contemporary Educational Psychology, Cognition and Instruction, Peabody Journal of Education, and Review of Educational Research.* Based on database and journal search results, we engaged in a forward search by using Google Scholar to identify relevant publications that cited other studies that we included. An additional 76 results were identified through journal and other searches. After deleting duplicates, we identified 211 unique records published between 2013 and 2019 for screening review.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

For this thematic literature review, we sought to understand how RPP scholars addressed equity and justice in educational contexts in the United States. We chose to focus on the U.S. context for several reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, we recognize that RPPs in the United States draw from a relatively unified definition of RPP from Penuel et al. (2013), which provides the foundation for the review of studies as defined by the study authors. Second, because we are a U.S. research team, we were not equipped with the knowledge and experience to adequately interpret and discuss topics of equity and social justice in international spaces, given that race and ethnicity, social class, gender and sexual identity, disability status, and other dimensions of inequality are socially constructed and hierarchies of dominance and subjugation manifest differently in different cultures. In other words, while racism and injustice are global phenomena, “each regional context is different of course. The victims differ in language and culture” (Boyle, 2003, p. 2). Third, we steadfastly avoided the risk of engaging in intellectual imperialism (Alatas, 2000) by making claims about equity and justice in RPPs in international contexts and—in doing so—exploiting the work of international RPP scholars and/or positioning ourselves as possessing the right or expertise to speak of their contexts.

In addition to the focus on RPP studies in the United States published between 2013 and 2019, this review identified studies that (a) were published as reports, journal articles, book chapters, or conference proceedings; (b) focused on problems, issues, and practices in educational contexts, including early childhood education, K–12 schools, community colleges and universities, and after-school programs; and (c) included discussions of the nature of RPPs. We included both empirical studies using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods and conceptual and theoretical papers in this review. After employing the inclusion criteria, we excluded 88 publications for the final review (see Figure 1). The excluded studies are RPP studies that were not in the U.S. contexts (e.g., Jesson & Spratt, 2017), focused on issues other than education (e.g., Palinkas et al., 2017), or did not explicitly identify their work as an RPP in their publication. For example, several articles discussed partnership work with schools and/or communities, but they did not specify that work was an RPP (e.g., Dutro et al., 2018). We focused on conference proceedings, conceptual papers, empirical papers, reports/essays, book chapters, and literature reviews in our literature review for two reasons. First, because RPPs are often written about in shorter documents for widespread dissemination to individuals in schools, universities, and communities, we decided to include reports/essays, book chapters, and conference proceedings. We also wanted to focus on peer-reviewed documents, such as empirical papers, conceptual papers, book chapters, and literature reviews. Books and dissertations were excluded for this review because they are less likely to be peer reviewed and/or widely disseminated.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram.

*Note.* This figure describes our exclusion and inclusion methods for the literature review.

Among the 149 publications included in the review, 69 were journal articles, 14 were book chapters, 9 were conference proceedings, 3 were conceptual papers, 12 were essays, 24 were reports or working papers, and 1 was a literature review. Eighty-eight records were excluded based on publication type (dissertation, thesis, book), publication date (prior to 2013), and/or study context (noneducation context).

### Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction and analysis for the review occurred in three phases. Each of these phases helped unpack our research question about how RPPs have addressed equity and justice. During the first phase, we used Dedoose (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) to support an exploratory analysis that examined the purpose of the article, RPP context and demographics,

theoretical perspectives, the problem of practice in the RPP, the RPP structure and routines, and any discussion of equity and social justice. This information helped us gain a broad understanding of the ways in which RPPs engaged (or did not) in work related to equity and justice, and to what extent. We extracted and organized this information in an Excel spreadsheet, which we discussed collaboratively.

For Phase 2, we focused analysis on studies that (a) utilized a theoretical framework related to equity and justice; (b) addressed problems of practice related to equity and justice; and (c) examined equitable relationships and systems. Here, our analysis became more focused, as we only coded for explicit and direct evidence related to equity and justice (equity-focused RPP work). During this phase, we developed a list of codes that we used during individual analysis (e.g., defines equity, research questions related to topics of equity, etc.) and then discussed collaboratively. We did not include examples from articles that were indirectly related to equity (e.g., programs created to improve learning) and/or did not explicitly discuss equity and justice as a focus; 132 publications were not included in Phase 3 analysis for these reasons. We recognize that working to improve education is a noble and necessary pursuit; however, when authors did not explicitly center and attend to equity and social justice in the article, we did not have clear evidence to draw on. This analysis resulted in 17 articles that did explicitly attend to equity and justice.

For Phase 3, we refined our analysis using the 17 articles (exemplars). From here, we further examined *how* those articles addressed equity and justice within their RPP work. During this phase, we examined the 17 articles for patterns related to how they addressed equity and justice using our codes from Phase 2. From that analysis, we developed the following five dimensions: (a) clear and intentional use of theoretical framework related to equity and justice; (b) purpose of research related to equity and justice; (c) clearly defined terms related to equity and justice; (d) use of research methods/design aligned with equity and justice; and (e) clear contribution related to equity and justice. To be considered an exemplar equity-focused RPP study, the publication needed to include three or more of the aforementioned characteristics. All 17 of the articles were coded using the five dimensions. Three articles were randomly selected to be coded by multiple researchers to test intercoder reliability. Each article was reviewed by at least two researchers, and the team reached over 95% agreement based on independent coding. We discuss those 17 exemplar studies (Table 1).

**TABLE 1 CAN BE FOUND AT THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT**

## **Findings**

Based on the five dimensions of equity and justice that could be observed within the RPP work we reviewed, we identified 17 exemplar projects that explicitly and effectively forefront equity and justice in RPPs (i.e., equity-focused), as described below. Exemplar studies serve to articulate established criteria and standards for future RPP work in this area. From our analysis, we found that an explicit choice to foreground equity and justice, coupled with effectiveness in this task, required weaving together multiple equity and justice elements in RPP work. Before describing the exemplars, we give an overview of the other 132 articles that we reviewed and discuss what insights they offer in relation to equity-focused RPPs.

## The Big Picture

From the 149 articles that we reviewed, 132 were *not* exemplars. From that literature, we learned several insights about how equity and justice is explored in RPP work. First, we learned that many of the articles focused on improving a problem of practice and/or improving their RPP. Overall, all of the articles were striving to improve education in some way by discussing topics, such as (a) exploring the collaborative relationships of partners (e.g., Leary & Severance, 2018); (b) implementing technology as a tool for learning (e.g., Louie & Buffington, 2017); (c) refining school, district, and community programs (Wang et al., 2017); (d) creating productive professional learning/development (e.g., Scholz et al., 2017); (e) planning and implementing continuous improvement (e.g., Redding et al., 2017); (e) fostering social emotional learning (e.g., Crowder et al., 2019); (f) examining challenges and successes of RPPs (e.g., Hartman, 2017); and (g) exploring educational perspectives and experiences of youth (e.g., Biag et al., 2016). Although a general goal of improvement could potentially be related to equity and justice, these topics were not explicitly equity-focused. Without an equity focus, such work can unintentionally maintain the status quo and further marginalize students and communities.

Second, we learned that the terms justice and equity were sometimes used in the articles, but they were not clearly defined or explored in relation to the purpose of the article. For example, Michalchik and Knudson (2017) discussed the role of *representations of teaching practice* as tools for achieving goals targeted mutually by researchers and practitioners. The chapter states that “an important part of the work of an RPP focused on increasing educational equity involves the development of easily recognizable patterns of practice designed to replace existing ones” (p. 152). They did not, however, explicitly state what they meant by RPPs focused on educational equity nor did they explore the ways in which representations of teaching practice are useful as a resource for shared work between researchers and practitioners who are focused on equity and justice-related teaching practices.

Overall, the 132 articles provided insight into the *potential* that RPP work has for contributing to equity-focused research. For example, of the 88 articles that discussed a theoretical framework, we learned that many used frameworks that *could* be used in equity-focused ways if used in combination with an explicit focus on equity and justice. For example, Resnik and Kazemi (2019) discussed the concept of decomposition of practice to support teachers as they unpack a deeper understanding of in-the-moment responses to context-specific interactions. This work was used with RPP partners to collaboratively engage in improvement efforts, specifically related to transforming day-to-day practice. Such a theory *could* be used to explicitly examine how those collaborations related to day-to-day practices related to equity and justice issues in their school in future research.

The 17 exemplar articles described next illuminate the importance of focusing on the five dimensions for equity-focused RPP work that we identified in our analysis: (a) use of equity and/or justice related frameworks; (b) focused purpose of the research on equity and justice; (c) clearly defined terms related to equity and justice; (d) use of research methods/design aligned with equity and justice; and (e) clear contribution to equity and justice.

## Use of Equity and/or Justice-Related Frameworks

The 17 exemplar studies explicitly used theories and/or frameworks related to equity and social justice to examine problems of practice in RPPs and/or the relationships and systems in RPPs. Within those 17, we found that scholars used theoretical frameworks to explore a range of topics, such as examining more equitable working relationships in RPPs, exploring educational perspectives and experiences of youth, and improving communication with parents. Specifically, we noted that these frameworks allowed RPPs to examine topics related to equitable structures of RPPs and ways to equitably address problems of practice in schools.

Some of these studies used equity and justice-related theories and frameworks to examine working relationships in RPPs. For example, Denner et al. (2019) used a critical research approach to examine the role of culture and power in building an RPP. The authors defined a critical research approach as aiming to “understand, uncover, and transform how educational research is related to social divisions and power differentials” (p. 2). For example, when they found that “staff perceived a power differential between the research team and themselves; they did not view the researchers as on their team but rather as people who were trying to get ‘special treatment’” (p. 6), the partners found it necessary to engage in explicit, intentional efforts to surface, recognize, and address power differentials within the RPP. Without intentional and explicit efforts to disrupt this pattern, the RPP could have reproduced—instead of disrupted—the traditional researcher/practitioner paradigm. Instead, the research team made the following adaptations: “(a) established a shared understanding of equity, (b) listened and responded, (c) aligned with [the youth-serving organization’s] priorities, (d) revised the research questions and focus, and (e) evolved from a task-oriented approach” to one centered on organizational norms and priorities (p. 7). This framework helped members of the RPP unpack what equity meant to them and improve how they functioned as a group.

Similarly, in an example focused on equity within RPPs, Klar et al. (2018) used equity-focused framing to examine how social capital was developed among the members of an RPP dedicated to creating and implementing a professional development initiative for rural school leaders in high-poverty school districts. Klar et al. drew on Uphoff’s (2000) definition of social capital as “an accumulation of various types of social, psychological, cultural, cognitive, institutional, and related assets that increase the amount (or probability) of mutually beneficial cooperative behavior” (p. 216). By using this framework, the authors found that providing an open and focused structure, negotiating roles, and fostering inclusive discussions helped promote equitable power dynamics in the RPP. Early on, the group worked together to develop the purpose of the RPP and the roles and responsibilities of the members. There was not one leader in the group because they invited multiple perspectives from faculty members, principals, and district leaders who oftentimes had different goals and visions. As a result, roles within the committee shifted depending on the topic of discussion and ideas were unpacked and worked on in ways that supported diverse perspectives. Thus, members shared power during the RPP work.

Other RPPs used equity or justice-related frameworks to address opportunity gaps, such as examining youth empowerment in education or how restorative justice practices reduce suspension rates for students of color (Anyon et al., 2017). For example, Kenny et al. (2019) applied the psychology of working framework and theory (PWF/PWT) to highlight the

importance of cultivating youth's critical consciousness about the opportunity gaps in career education and designed career education interventions that strengthened youth's psychological resources that support their work fulfillment. The PWF draws from critical perspectives that observe how "traditional career theories privileged the concerns of the middle class and excluded the poor and working class" (p. 625). This framework and theory not only foregrounds social discrimination and economic constraints, but also provides a more "realistic way of understanding work and career" (p. 625).

Other RPPs used equity and justice-related theories and frameworks to explore communication between parents and teachers. Ishimaru and Takahashi (2017) combined the concept of institutional scripts from organizational theory with transformative agency from sociocultural learning theories to address interactions between families and educators. In this design-based research project, they applied these theories to examine and rewrite racialized institutional scripts in an effort to attend to power relations and build "parent-teacher relations toward collective agency and critical solidarities toward educational justice" (p. 343). In particular, the authors described the following three codesign practices used in the RPP that were useful: reframing expertise, surfacing and examining contradiction, and attending to power. For example, to reframe expertise, members of the RPP asked parents who reflected the racial and ethnic background of the student population in their schools to participate in the design process. As a result, parents were situated as experts as they worked with other RPP members to develop a parent-educator curriculum. In addition, "the experiences and counternarratives of nondominant parents provided alternatives to dominant discourses and institutional scripts" (p. 354). In these exemplars, equity and justice-related theoretical frameworks specifically surfaced power dynamics, brought marginalized stakeholder groups into the process, disrupted historical and oppressive patterns, and built critical consciousness. They combined an equity lens to recognize power dynamics with a social justice lens to interrogate and change those dynamics.

#### Purpose of the Research Focused on Equity and Justice

All of the exemplar studies also explicitly described the purpose of the research in relation to equity and justice. For many of the articles, the purpose of research was focused on addressing a problem of practice such as providing more access to educational resources for marginalized youth or leveraging the everyday knowledge of youth, while others focused on equitable RPP structures. For example, both Bevan et al. (2017) and Ryoo et al. (2019) explored issues of access and equity as they relate to marginalized youth and computer science (CS) learning. Ryoo et al. (2019) collected information about students' learning experiences

in order to understand if and how historically underrepresented youth in CS—including students of color, low-income students, and females—are gaining opportunities to feel empowered to pursue CS or incorporate CS into their future learning, personal interests, and/or career pathways. (p. 1)

Thus, the overarching goal of the research was to explore how students' sense of CS identity, agency, and engagement shaped learning experiences, and to shift opportunities in a more equitable way.

Other RPP researchers focused on how teachers made sense of equity and justice within their classrooms and curriculum. For example, Santo et al. (2019) explored how K–12 educators conceptualized equity and how those conceptualizations shaped their planning and implementation of district-wide CS initiatives. Findings illustrated that members conceptualized equity within their initiatives in the following ways: (a) equity in who Computer Science is for, (b) equity in how Computer Science is taught, and (c) equity in what Computer Science is taught. These varied beliefs about equity impacted the kinds of decisions that were being made about Computer Science Education in districts. For example, one district focused on a culturally responsive curriculum that was relevant to the lives and backgrounds of the students. Another district planned to use Computer Science as a tool for helping students examine power and privilege within technological contexts.

Penuel (2017) discussed four different kinds of equity projects in science education that purposefully leverage the everyday knowledge and out-of-school experiences of students to promote learning within a variety of contexts. The goal of this research, then, was to describe ways in which RPPs are working toward more equitable science education in schools. For example, Penuel suggests one way that RPPs can address historical inequities is by “expanding who participates in designing policies and programs in science education” (p. 522). Specifically, he discussed a partnership with the American Indian Center of Chicago, Northwestern, TERC, and organizations on the Menonminee reservation in Wisconsin focused on expanding “Native American students’ participation in science, a group that is not only underrepresented in science but whose communities have had their education controlled by outside agencies” (p. 522). The partnership has been purposeful about having Indigenous people as leaders to make decisions about equitable science instruction.

Some of the exemplar studies had a research purpose focused on improving equity and justice within the partnership. For example, Ghiso et al. (2019) illustrated how mentorship in an RPP requires all members of the research team to work within and against academic hierarchies, and to negotiate a range of cultural, linguistic, institutional, and class boundaries. In another example, Bevan et al. (2019) discussed the purpose of their research as exploring the value of RPPs in the CS community. Data were gathered from a series of workshops focused on developing and designing RPPs within a “CS for All” community. Within these workshops, they focused on exploring how RPPs can be “intentionally designed to include community stakeholders, such as parents, students, and others whose voices are often excluded in educational improvement efforts” (p. 1). The purpose of the research was to examine how such workshops support equitable and just work in RPPs, including how to create a shared vision and include practitioners’ voices. These equity-focused RPP examples had a common element of supporting greater access to educational opportunity, with a focus on marginalized groups who had been excluded. Greater inclusivity and access would be one equity-aligned purpose for RPPs, but others included a focus on equitable experiences within the RPP.

### Clearly Defined Terms Related to Equity and Justice

All of the exemplar articles provided clear definitions of equity and justice-related terms. Some of these terms were related to pedagogy, while others defined broader terms (e.g., power). For example, Penuel and Watkins (2019) defined *equitable teaching*, as supported by sociocultural

perspectives on teaching and learning, as focused “on supporting and monitoring implementation of teaching practices that build from students’ cultural funds of knowledge, practices, and identity resources” (p. 204). They further explain those practices by describing two cases in an RPP that engaged in “tools and routines to inform classroom teaching” such as “monitoring assessments focused on student experience of the classroom” (p. 212). Thus, their definition of equitable teaching aligned with specific practices they discussed and implemented in the study and can be used to advance theory, research, and practice related to equity.

Similarly, in an RPP focused on a school partnership, Coppola et al. (2019) drew on theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) to define *culturally sustaining pedagogies* (CSPs) as “conscious enactments of love to combat the dehumanization of marginalized communities by preserving and nurturing linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” (p. 227). In combination with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, this design-based research project in a seventh-grade classroom illustrated that students who engaged in a 9-week spoken word poetry unit were more engaged, participated more, and appreciated how their identities were considered during the unit. The project challenged educators to explicitly support students’ languages, literacies, and cultural traditions in some ways upended typical power dynamics but overlooked others (e.g., alternatives to spoken word poetry for students who do not have oral language).

Other RPPs defined broader terms, such as equity or power. For example, Denner et al. (2019) explicitly discussed the role of culture and power in building an RPP. They defined *power* to “include the ways in which people navigate institutional and relational systems of oppression that affect their educational pathways” (p. 2). Authors stated that when members explicitly defined and discussed roles of power and culture in the partnership, the research questions and processes shifted to be more equitable.

#### Use of Research Methods/Design Aligned With Equity and Justice

The fourth criteria focuses on how studies used equity-centered research methods. We noted that 15 of the 17 exemplar studies used equity and justice-related research methods. The remaining two included a theoretical paper (Kenny et al., 2019) and a description of research studies (Penuel, 2017), so methods were not a part of their papers. Denner et al. (2019) used a critical ethnographic approach that involved “applying a self-reflective lens to the narrative produced and the interpretation aligned with it” (p. 4). This lens was particularly helpful in examining the power differences between partners, and how they negotiated those differences.

Other studies focused on the voices of students or teachers to illustrate their perspectives related to equity and justice (Bevan et al., 2019; Ryoo et al., 2019). For example, Ryoo et al. (2019) explained that they used pre- and postsurveys, observations, and in-depth interviews in an effort to amplify student perspectives in their research, with the purpose of understanding the CS learning experiences of underrepresented students. Thus, they spotlighted student perspectives to illustrate students’ sense of CS identity, agency, and engagement. Gutiérrez and Jurow (2016) introduced social design experimentation, an approach to design research that is dedicated to promoting social equity and learning by transforming the educational and social circumstances of nondominant communities. One component of this approach is a focus on the investment of community partners in codeveloped designs, a form of power sharing.

Other studies used equity frameworks to analyze data (Klar et al., 2018; Santo et al., 2019). For example, Klar et al. (2018) used Uphoff's framework during analysis to consider the concepts of structural and cognitive capital "that comprise social capital, including networks, roles, rules, precedents, procedures, norms, values, attitudes and beliefs during the process, viewing the development of this capital as a boundary-spanning practice" (p. 293). This analysis helped them create their final themes (unstructured structure; open communication; respecting varied perspectives; renegotiating roles; and commitment to a shared purpose) and ultimately better understand the power dynamics in the RPP. These exemplar studies used equity-centered research methods intentionally, in a way that framed, collected, and understood data as reflective of power imbalances and historical injustices. Rather than just collect pre- and postintervention data to document the effectiveness of specific interventions, an equity-focused RPP could seek to understand students' experiences within the project, including their identities and contexts as part of the data, and to conduct analyses that identify power relationships and seek to transform them (e.g., Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Ryoo et al., 2019; Santo et al., 2019).

#### Clear Contribution Related to Equity and Justice in Education

By clear contribution, we mean that authors discussed the role their research played in bringing about a result related to equity and justice (e.g., including traditionally marginalized voices) or in helping advance equity and justice in the way the work was undertaken (e.g., making power more explicit in RPPs). Out of the 149 articles that we reviewed, only 17 discussed clear contributions related to equity and justice in education, such as proposing how to coordinate problem-based learning in more equitable ways (DeBarger & Chun, 2017) or describing the importance of infrastructure for equitable and sustainable implementation (Penuel, 2019). For example, Pollock's (2013) study resulted in bringing together educators, youth, families, and communities to figure out how and when low-cost and commonplace technologies can support necessary communications. This work contributes to equity and justice by helping schools think about how to work together to make decisions about which channels to test, how to design those channels, and which habits and ground rules are best to reach marginalized populations to "enable specific communications necessary for student support" (p. 21). Similarly, Ishimaru and Takahashi (2017) made explicit connections to equity and justice outcomes by discussing an RPP focused on disrupting racialized institutional scripts between parents and teachers. Their research has implications for how parents and educators might collaborate to attend to power in relational dynamics in order to expand identities and interactions in the presence of racial, cultural, and class differences across roles. The structure of these RPPs played a large part in these contributions by opening opportunities to jointly develop a relevant and meaningful research agenda and collaborate in ways that benefitted multiple community members/partners.

Gutiérrez and Jurow (2016) helped advance equity and justice by clearly defining a more equitable way of engaging in research through social design experiments that draw critical attention to how researchers and communities can work together to organize more just social futures. Such work is more sustainable because community partners can be invested in the codeveloped designs, which through their expansive nature evolve over time. These exemplar studies identified a very specific target to be changed by the RPP (e.g., breaking down identity-

based assumptions in parent–teacher communication, using technology as a means to broaden access to information) which included greater equity and distribution of power as goals.

### What Was Missing From the Exemplars?

In our analysis of the exemplar articles, we noticed two significant topics that were not addressed in relation to equity and justice: scaling up and assessing the effectiveness of the projects. For RPP work, scaling up is associated with making large-scale educational improvements (Jesson & Spratt, 2017). The topic of scaling up, then, is related to equity and justice because the overarching goal is to make systemic educational improvements in these areas across schools, districts, and states. Redding et al. (2017) argued that mutual adaptation between interventions and their contexts provides a way in which interventions can maintain their coherence while being refined for specific contexts. In this sense, scaling up is not about fidelity but rather about mutual adaptation. Scholars have argued that DBIR is particularly well suited to this effort (Borko & Klingner, 2013), in that partners focus inquiry on the implementation process, “treating the process of adapting practices as a mechanism to learn about local context and the elements of the innovation most beneficial to students” (Redding et al., 2017, p. 598).

As such, RPP scholars argue that the best way to develop capacity for sustaining and expanding innovation is through the careful design of practices intended to promote ongoing mutual engagement for partners at various levels of the educational system so that they fully understand and support the roles and activities at other levels (Scherrer et al., 2013). For example, Word Generation, an interdisciplinary approach to developing general and academic vocabulary through engaged discussion of civic and social dilemmas, developed as a field site initiative for Grades 6 to 8. It is one of the design based RPPs established by the Strategic Education Research Partnership through a partnership with Boston Public Schools and expanded to other districts in Massachusetts and Maryland. It is now available for Grades 4 to 8 and has scaled up to various districts across various states (Strategic Education Research Partnership, 2021; Tamer, 2015). None of the exemplar articles, however, directly examined issues of equity and justice in relation to scaling up innovations, a much needed area of study.

Another missing topic from the exemplar studies relates to thoroughly assessing the effectiveness of equity-focused RPP projects. As reported above, Henrick et al. (2019) argued that equity and effectiveness need to be considered in tandem because effective partnerships are those that attend to equity. Building upon the RPP Effectiveness Framework by Henrick et al. (2016), Henrick et al. (2019) argued that equity is relevant to each of five dimensions of RPP effectiveness in their framework: (a) building trust; (b) disrupting inequitable research traditions; (c) supporting partners’ equity-focused goals; (d) developing equitable and accessible systems; and (e) building equity-specific capacity. In other words, equity-focused RPPs need to assess the effectiveness of their RPPs by examining equity elements along each of the dimensions of RPP effectiveness. These exemplars did not consistently or explicitly address the effectiveness of RPPs and their outcomes with regard to equity and social justice. The field would benefit from a thorough and nuanced model for capturing the multiple process and outcome dimensions of RPPs related to equity and justice.

## Discussion

For nearly a century, scholars in education and in other disciplines have identified the need for mutual and authentic partnerships between researchers and practitioners (or participants), as well as the need for meaningful movement toward equity and social justice for communities and stakeholders. In the United States, many pioneers have documented efforts, reported findings, and made urgent calls for attention to this essential work (e.g., AERA's 2004/2006 commitment to diversity, inclusion, and social justice). Yet, in the United States, equity and social justice remain elusive in many schools and communities, and the pleas for partnerships aimed at reducing it, in part through RPPs, continue (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). Taking on power dynamics and moving toward equity with real human beings and systems is challenging but necessary work. This requires identifying whether and how RPPs are self-consciously and effectively moving the needle in this quest to disrupt the power dynamics of expert-driven research and more broadly addressing issues of equity and social justice. To address this need, we undertook this review as a starting point, to synthesize and gain a greater understanding of whether, through what means, and to what ends, current U.S.-based RPPs engage in effective equity-focused work. Specifically, we synthesized varied theories, frameworks, definitions, methods, and outcomes related to equity and justice that emerged as hallmarks of this work and identified five dimensions of RPP work that attend to and advance equity and social justice.

Since we undertook this review, Farrell et al. (2021) published a “state of the field” report in which they expanded on the seminal 2013 work by Coburn et al., “Research-Practice Partnerships at the District Level: A New Strategy for Leveraging Research for Educational Improvement.” In their report, Farrell et al. (2021) revised the definition of RPPs such that RPPs are

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

We are encouraged by explicit attention to shifting power relations in the joint work of research, as well as the incorporation of “educational improvement or equitable transformation” into the definition of RPPs. However, we reject the suggestion that educational improvement and equitable transformation are either/or and instead argue that they should be both/and. In other words, RPPs should be explicitly focused on educational improvement and equity. If educational improvement is inequitable, it is not improvement at all.

With that in mind, we provide insights for purposeful grounding in equity and justice that attend to both improvement and transformation based on our findings. Drawing directly from the exemplars showcased in our review, we posit the following five dimensions of equity-focused RPP work:

- RPPs can *explicitly use equity-centered frameworks*, such as social capital (Klar et al., 2018) and organizational theory with transformative agency (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017) to frame research questions and design, inform analysis, and interpret findings.

- RPPs can *orient their research purpose around ongoing equity issues*, such as access of marginalized youth to computer science learning (Ryoo et al., 2019) to address enduring inequities and injustices in education.
- RPPs can *clearly define terms related to equity and justice*, such as equitable teaching (Penuel & Watkins, 2019), power (Denner et al., 2019), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Coppola et al., 2019) to build shared awareness and understanding as well as to further research and theory around these concepts. Consistently developing such shared understandings between partners is a necessary and difficult process.
- RPPs can *use equity-oriented research designs and methodologies*, such as critical ethnography (Denner et al., 2019) and social design experimentation (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016) to ensure that researcher positionality, data collection, and analysis disrupt practices that normalize or render invisible existing inequities and explicitly disrupt the marginalization of nondominant groups by centering their voices and experiences. As discussed, RPPs require joint work that shapes the fluidity of research and practice in ways that more traditional, academic research does not.
- RPPs can *promote equitable impacts for students, families, and educators* by, for example, working with stakeholder groups to utilize technology for communication in ways that resonate with marginalized groups (Pollock, 2013) and disrupting and replacing racialized institutional scripts between parents and teachers (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2017).

Next, we discuss these dimensions in relation to Henrick et al.'s (2019) three equity-focused goals that discuss equitable relationships, outcomes, and systems. We explain how our findings confirm and contribute to these already established equity-focused goals for RPPs and add one more goal to this scholarly conversation.

First, Henrick et al. (2019) argue that RPPs can support the *development of equitable relationships* between researchers and practitioners by “explicitly addressing historical imbalances of power between” communities and focusing on problems faced by organizations (p. 8). Specifically, they point to the importance of building and cultivating mutual trust and racial solidarity (Vakil et al., 2016). Our review of exemplar RPPs adds to this equity-focused goal by illustrating how several studies oriented their research around the topic of equitable partnerships. For example, some research focused on illuminating how external forces shaped equitable relationships in RPPs (Denner et al., 2019), while others examined tools they used to develop such relationships, such as social capital (Klar et al., 2018), working within and against academic hierarchies (Ghiso et al., 2019), and inclusion and access to conversations focused on developing a shared vision (Bevan et al., 2019). In other words, the aforementioned RPP teams engaged in explicit, intentional efforts to surface, recognize, address, and resolve power differentials that made steps toward mutuality. Such steps attempted to move toward deeper instantiations of intentionally socially just partnerships. This review, then, points to future work that needs to explicitly examine both *why* inequities might occur in RPP relationships and *how* more equitable relationships are being built over time in current RPP work.

Second, Henrick et al. (2019) suggest that RPPs can *support equitable outcomes* (e.g., instruction) for students by “engaging in research that specifically investigates and addresses inequities faced by schools, districts, and states” (p. 8). Our review confirms and adds to this

equity-focused goal by illustrating how the RPPs that explicitly and intentionally took steps to define equity-related terms, address equity, and dismantle inequities made progress and gained insights toward these goals. Some of these RPPs did so by focusing on more equitable and just curriculum and instruction, such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Coppola et al., 2019), active learning experiences in STEM (Bevan et al., 2017), and problem-based learning (DeBarger & Chun, 2017). Other studies focused on equitable outcomes between community members, such as examining inequitable interactions between educators and parents (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017) and the benefits of restorative practices in the district (Anyon et al., 2017). Each exemplar study, then, provided concrete examples of how to enact this work. Thus, one of the most powerful insights that emerged in this review is that while RPPs can be a vehicle for dismantling inequities or moving the RPP needle toward equity and social justice, this is neither automatic nor ensured. The RPP projects reported here that directed *conscious* attention, articulation, and action toward equity and social justice throughout multiple aspects of their design and implementation reported results that reflect insights or movement in the desired direction. As a result, we recommend that future work explicitly define equity-related terms and address *how* their RPP work impacts equitable outcomes in school communities.

Third, Henrick et al. (2019) argue that RPPs can *support the development of equitable systems* by “reconceptualizing how research institutions, practice institutions, and communities work together for shared goals, removing barriers that limit progress, and building capacities for individuals and organizations to better collaborate” (p. 8). We confirm and add to this goal by discussing literature that intentionally chose topics, methods, and frameworks that examined equitable systems. For example, Penuel (2019) discussed how infrastructuring, which refers to activities that aim to redesign components, relations, and routines of schools and districts that influence what takes place in classrooms, were used to support more equitable implementation and sustainability of resources supporting student learning in design-based research. Other research focused on supporting partners to critically reflect by examining how K–12 educators’ conceptualizations of equity manifested within their planning and implementation of district-wide CS initiatives (Santo et al., 2019). Findings from the literature review also pointed to how research methods can help support more equitable systems. For example, Denner et al. (2019) used a critical ethnographic approach, requiring researchers to examine their positionality, specifically how they, as researchers, impact the study. Similarly, Ishimaru & Takahashi (2017) engaged in a participatory design-based project, which actively engaged all stakeholders, to show how collaborative activity shifts power. In addition, Kenny et al. (2019) foregrounded the needs of students’ perspectives despite challenging research-held conceptual frameworks. Overall, the exemplars in this review illustrated how researchers practiced more equitable systems through the support of equity and justice-related methodologies and frameworks. Future equity-focused work, then, would benefit from considering and examining how methodologies and frameworks shape equity and justice work in RPPs.

In addition to Henrick et al.’s (2019) equity-focused goals, we would add that one distinguishing feature of all the exemplar RPPs reviewed in this article is that they *centered equity in multiple dimensions of their work*, something that was not evident in the other 132 studies. Specifically, the exemplar RPPs integrated most, if not all, of the five dimensions (Figure 2): (a) use of equity and/or justice-related frameworks; (b) focused purpose of the research on equity and justice; (c) clearly defined terms related to equity and justice; (d) use of research methods/design aligned

with equity and justice; and (e) clear contribution to equity and justice. These interconnected features of inquiry provide a potential building blocks for researchers and practitioners to move closer to equitable relationships, outcomes, and systems. Researchers and practitioners who have initiated equity-orientated RPPs may reflect on these features to further enhance their equity-focus through RPPs. Future research would benefit from exploring *how* these and other dimensions work together toward equity-focused RPP work.

**Figure 2.** Equity-focused RPPs.

*Note.* This figure illustrates actions educators can take toward equity-focused RPPs.

## Implications

Our review has implications for those who engage in RPP work within the United States, funders, and publishers. We encourage funders to prioritize equity-oriented research partnerships by releasing requests for proposals that center on—or provide a competitive priority for—projects that frame processes and goals addressing equity and social justice. For example, there are an increasing number of equity-oriented RPP projects in the field of CS in particular, several of which were funded by an NSF grant entitled *Computer Science for All: RPP* (<https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2018/nsf18537/nsf18537.htm>). The high school strand of this proposal required assessing the effectiveness of PD models with respect to classroom equity, and adapting and scaling PD models for greater impact, specifically related to inclusion and equity.

We call upon publishers to move beyond special editions focused on RPPs or equity and social justice topics by establishing an open access journal, without article processing charges, to feature partnership work in education across international contexts. The aims and scope of such a journal should reflect a commitment to scholarship that explicitly promotes equity and social justice and encourages the partnership of researchers and practitioners beyond local, regional, or national educational contexts. The inaugural editorial team should be diverse and include international RPP scholars, such as those from the United States featured in this review’s exemplars and those who have published equity-oriented partnership scholarship in other international journals and in languages other than English. Furthermore, the audience for such a journal should include researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, and the journal could incorporate multiple types of papers, including empirical and theoretical scholarship, reviews, opinion pieces, policy briefs, and showcases of exemplar projects. Moreover, existing journals that include RPP work could introduce consideration of issues of equity and justice into guidelines for authors. Alternatively, partners could produce various types of publications through differing outlets (e.g., district newsletters, family communications, social media blogs, etc.) that are relevant to individuals.

## Limitations

Although we undertook a systematic approach to reviewing the RPP literature and identifying themes that centered on equity and social justice, we acknowledge the limitations inherent in our work. We recognize that there are biases inherent in our approach. Because we quantified our initial themes and trends, our findings and interpretations were affected by multiple publication

bias (i.e., several articles in which researchers publish findings from the same RPP project). For instance, The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University yielded multiple articles in which the authors addressed issues of equity and social justice (e.g., Biag et al., 2016), providing additional elaborations and insights into those topics. To minimize potential multiple publication bias, within those themes and trends, we identified subcategories that emerged through the literature to illustrate the unique arguments and findings inherent in each publication specific to equity and justice. Then, we used projects and publications as examples to identify and substantiate those themes.

Publication and disciplinary search biases are also evident in this review. We attempted to minimize publication bias by including peer- and non-peer-reviewed RPP publications; however, we acknowledge we did not include unpublished studies. Disciplinary search bias is evident in that we focused our review on RPP publications in the education literature. Expanding our systematic search procedures to include other disciplines could have minimized this bias. Time and geolocation search biases are also evident. Geographically, we acknowledge that we limited our systematic search procedures to RPP work in the United States. Future studies on equity and justice in RPPs would benefit from having an international research team whose knowledge and experience can help interpret and discuss this topic across international spaces. In terms of dates, because we included articles in this review published from 2013 to 2019, we have not captured a full breadth of RPP history. Instead, we have carried out a focused review, commencing with the foundational work of Penuel et al. (2013)—a primary impetus for contemporary RPP work. Limiting our focus to this time period also allowed us to identify RPP themes aimed at advancing equity and social justice in education in the most up to date literature.

It is also valuable to note that the goal of transforming the field of RPP research to fully embody equity and social justice is a considerable undertaking. The provisions called for here operate within the system, and although insightful and informative as a starting place, the studies here are—in and of themselves—insufficient to the larger task of addressing equity and social justice. A more thorough and broader critical lens that interrogates beyond “where we are now” is warranted. These limitations notwithstanding, our findings move the field forward by identifying ways in which RPP work can be explicitly equity-focused.

## **Conclusion**

This review was designed to both inform and catalyze the field of RPPs toward disrupting intractable barriers to equity and social justice. The history of, and the contemporary statements of commitment to, RPP work, coupled with the potential for RPPs to contribute meaningfully to the goals of equity and social justice, suggest that progress in these efforts could (should) already be extensive. As revealed in this review, however, the field has yet to maximize RPPs potential for doing so in educational systems, lived experiences, or research partnerships. To address this need, more education researchers and practitioners can embrace thorough, conscious, explicit action that centers equity and social justice in RPP work. The exemplar studies offered in this review are a powerful beginning. As outlined above, there are five dimensions that support equity-focused RPP work. Exploring those dimensions will fill longstanding gaps in the literature and in present-day education research and practice, equipping RPP stakeholders with the knowledge, skill, and understanding needed to improve equity and social justice not only in

the research process but also in educational and life outcomes for all—marking a new milestone in educational and RPP history.

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**Table 1.** Exemplar studies

| Reference ( <i>context</i> )  | Framework   | Purpose  | Definitions  | Methods   | Contributions   |
|---|---|--|--|---|---|
| Anyon et al. (2017) ( <i>university–community RPP</i> )             | Restorative practices and how they are linked to racial disparities   | To examine local explanatory frameworks for discipline disparities and understand how they sustained, or minimized, racial injustice in schools.                         | Discipline policy reform that reduces suspensions and expulsions, eliminates racial disparities, and increases the use of approaches such as restorative practices.                                      | Qualitative inquiry of strategies employed at (a) schools that had low suspension rates, or (b) schools that had been identified as exemplary models of schoolwide restorative practices.       | Intervention had positive results in reducing students’ likelihood of entering the discipline system or being suspended from schools. Funds from mental health expansion grants paid for restorative practices. |
| Bevan et al. (2019) ( <i>NSF-funded CS for all initiatives</i> )    | Relevance, salience, and sustainability of improvement results from two dimensions of equity: inclusion of practitioner voices and addressing histories and structures of injustice | The goal of the program is to advance both knowledge and practice in creating inclusive, responsive computer science/computational thinking programs for all K–12 youth. | In team, workshop participants (a) define what equity means for their project; (b) unpack the “problem of practice”; (c) describe project aims and activities; (d) identify RQs; (e) map out evaluation. | Surveys that included many stakeholders—district and state leaders, classroom educators, computer scientists, learning scientists and education researchers, evaluators, and industry partners. | RPPs can be designed to include community stakeholders, such as parents, students, and others whose voices are often excluded in educational improvement efforts.   |
| Bevan et al. (2017) ( <i>after-school STEM programs</i> )           | Equity-oriented active learning (maker space)   | A RPP involving four programs serving youth from marginalized communities identified key characteristics of equity oriented Maker activities and facilitation.           | Equity-oriented Making activities meant helping students recognize their own experiences and skills, positioning them as capable, and supporting them to persist through difficulties.                   | Description of equity-oriented Making and how best to support facilitators so they can intentionally prepare and maintain these spaces.   | Practical examples of designing active learning experiences in STEM to support equity goals; clear and replicable.  |
| Coppola et al. (2019) ( <i>seventh grade literacy classroom</i> )   | Culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP), building off of theory of culturally relevant pedagogy  | How did the design and implementation of the unit invite more complex understandings of cultures and identities?   | Universal design for learning (UDL) and culturally sustaining pedagogies.  | Qualitative case study  | CSP supported students in making their identities more visible in the classroom, while UDL principles eliminated barriers for participation.  |
| DeBarger & Chun (2017) ( <i>multiple educational institutions</i> ) | Examine problem-based learning (PBL) for macro and micro equity-related challenges  | To explore how RPPs can address the equity-related challenges of deepening and scaling PBL.  | Micro-level challenges in PBL can exacerbate existing performance gaps. Macrolevel challenges arise from the nature of the larger education system and how reform typically occurs.                      | Uses design-based iterative methods to develop and test lessons, address learning goals, and incorporate phenomena relevant to students.  | Discussed five equity-related tensions between the macro- and micro-factors of enacting PBL that must be coordinated to develop, spread, and sustain deeper learning practices and outcomes.                    |

| <b>Reference (<i>context</i>)</b>                                   | <b>Framework</b>   | <b>Purpose</b>  | <b>Definitions</b>   | <b>Methods</b>  | <b>Contributions</b>   |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| Denner et al. (2019) ( <i>RPP with two nonprofits</i> )             | Critical race theory and community cultural wealth   | To examine the role of culture and power in how the RPP was negotiated between researchers and practitioners.                                       | Power is the navigation of institutional and relational systems of oppression that can affect educational pathways.  | Critical ethnographic approach, used by members of dominant groups to see from the perspective of others.                       | When power and culture are not explicitly seen in an RPP, inequities and injustices are perpetuated.   |
| Ghiso et al. (2019) ( <i>university–community RPP</i> )             | Draws on feminist epistemologies and realist theories of identity, centering the perspectives of nondominant communities   | To describe findings on what mentorship looks like in an RPP focusing on educational equity.  | Defines identities as claims about social relations and the broader world which helps shape and define the relations among groups.                                       | Grounded theory analytic approach, with a particular emphasis on self-reflexivity, situated interpretation, and power dynamics. | Mentorship requires all members of the research team to work within and against academic hierarchies, and to negotiate a range of cultural, linguistic, institutional, and class boundaries. |
| Gutiérrez & Jurow (2016) ( <i>university–community RPPs</i> )       | This notion of equity draws inspiration from legal scholarship centered on correcting injustice and eliminating corruption                                       | Design research that is committed to equity, transforming the social and educational circumstances of members of nondominant communities.           | A robust equity design could detect policies, practices, and interventions that fall short of their promise and fail members of nondominant communities.                 | Advancing an approach to social design experiments with community-based interventions centered on equity.                       | Expanding the toolkit for designing in the learning sciences so the goals of design work more directly align with social purposes.   |
| Ishimaru & Takahashi (2017) ( <i>parent–teacher communication</i> ) | Incorporating the concept of institutional scripts from organizational theory with transformative agency from sociocultural learning theories                    | Examine interactions between families and educators that could rewrite racialized institutional scripts and expand parent–teacher identities.       | Racialized institutional scripts provide norms, expectations, and assumptions that constrain marginalized families and educators from disrupting educational inequities. | Using examples from a participatory design-based project to show how collaborative activity shifts power.                       | Collaborative activity might (a) reframe expertise, (b) surface contradictions, and (c) attend to power in relational dynamics across differences.   |
| Kenny et al. (2019) ( <i>school-based career education</i> )        | The psychology of working framework (PWF) observed how traditional career theories privileged the middle class and excluded the voices of the poor/working class | PWF and its application for career development intervention, with specific attention to the constructs of youth purpose and critical consciousness. | The PWF views work as an important life activity that contributes to well-being by satisfying human needs for economic survival, connection, and self-determination.     | Theoretical paper   | PWF prepares young people for a rapidly changing world of work. Economic marginalization needs to be considered in career development education.   |

| <b>Reference (<i>context</i>)</b>  | <b>Framework</b>   | <b>Purpose</b>   | <b>Definitions</b>   | <b>Methods</b>   | <b>Contributions</b>  |
|--|--|--|--|--|---|
| Klar et al. (2018) ( <i>consortium of 12 rural school districts</i> )    | Social capital framing to examine how social capital was developed among the members of an RPP                                     | To examine how social capital was developed among the members of a steering committee between a university and a consortium of rural, high-poverty school districts.             | Defines social capital as an accumulation of various types of assets that increase cooperative behavior for mutual benefit.  | Deductive coding process   | The steering committee's norms and procedures led to collaboration on a leadership development initiative through boundary-spanning practices.                                      |
| Penuel (2017) ( <i>after-school STEM programs</i> )                      | Drawing on and reviewing equity in science education, requiring an approach that attends to power                                  | To explore four different kinds of equity projects, leveraging knowledge developed through RPPs.   | Addressing historical inequity by expanding participation of marginalized communities and enriching impoverished educational ecosystems.                               | Theoretical reframe of other research projects   | Science for all requires specialized expertise about particular communities and students within them; goal is to include new voices in conduct of RPP research.                     |
| Penuel (2019) ( <i>university–community RPP</i> )                        | Draws on infrastructuring frameworks that help analyze educational change efforts across a range of contexts and levels of systems | To present infrastructuring as a useful construct to support more equitable implementation and sustainability of resources supporting student learning in design-based research. | Infrastructuring refers to activities that aim to redesign components, relations, and routines of schools and districts that influence what takes place in classrooms. | Methods of research that developed validity evidence for measures of student experience.   | Measure that helps identify how students' sense of epistemic agency, feelings of excitement, and identification with science are examples of infrastructuring that promotes equity. |
| Penuel & Watkins (2019) ( <i>science classes in large urban school</i> ) | Drawing on equity theories in science education  | Supporting the redistribution of opportunities (equity) and repairing students' self-perceptions as agents of knowing (epistemic justice).                                       | Equity is informed by sociocultural perspectives, building from students' cultural funds of knowledge, practices, and identity resources.                              | Describing components of the RPP's assessment system and educational practices that work together to accomplish the equity and justice aims. | The importance of assessing how teaching connects to students' interests, experiences, and identities, not just cognitive dimensions of learning.                                   |
| Pollock (2013) ( <i>partnership across community ecologies</i> )         | Social network research and social capital research  | Figuring out how and when low-cost technologies can support necessary communications between the range of stakeholders.  | Communication infrastructure to make successful partnership more likely and reduce barriers to equity.   | Participatory design research effort   | When educators, youth, and families help design and embed needed tools in their own schools, they can make communication reliable, robust, routine.                                 |

| <b>Reference (context)</b>   | <b>Framework</b>   | <b>Purpose</b>  | <b>Definitions</b>  | <b>Methods</b>  | <b>Contributions</b>   |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|
| Ryoo et al. (2019)<br>( <i>CS project in large urban high school</i> )                 | Because this is a short conference paper, they do not specify a framework—they do focus on equity research as a foundation                                   | What makes a critical difference in traditionally under-represented students' learning and engagement in HS computer science classes?                 | Equity must challenge historical inequities. Change must happen on multiple levels, such as school structure, belief systems, pedagogy and policy.      | Pre- and postsurvey questions, detailed observations of student learning in four CS classrooms, and in-depth interviews of 20 students. | We gain a clearer understanding of how CS learning experiences inform students' sense of CS identity, agency, and engagement.  |
| Santo et al. (2019)<br>( <i>CS project across rural, suburban, and urban schools</i> ) | Pedagogically focused discussions of what equitable teaching and learning look like for various groups, such as those with disabilities, women, ESL students | How do K–12 actors' conceptualizations of equity manifest within their planning and implementation of districtwide computer science (CS) initiatives? | Equity is a value within the CS community; however, stakeholders often mean different things by equity, with implications for CS teaching and learning. | Analyzed the data through qualitative equity frameworks.  | (a) Equity in who CS is for, (b) how it is taught, and (c) what is taught, translated into practical choices in curriculum and course development, learning outcomes and implementation. |

*Note.* RPP = research–practice partnership; NSF = National Science Foundation; CS = computer science; STEM = science, technology, engineering, and medicine.