



## Partnering to Make a Homeplace for Black Families: Black Women's Systemic Leadership in an Era of Retrenchment

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how a research-community-practice partnership (RCPP) led primarily by Black women district and community leaders navigated systemic challenges to racial equity work and created conditions for co-designing with Black families and communities. Drawing on data analyses from planning meetings with district leaders, families, community partners, and university researchers, we discuss three findings pertaining to our RCPP's efforts to foster conditions for co-designing justice-centered, pro-Black early literacy learning with Black families and educators: 1) Black women leaders' ability to "read" the historically-rooted dynamic inequities of the system; 2) Black women's leadership and placemaking in the RCPP to co-create

homeplace; and 3) community partners' leadership in evolving our partnership practices to better honor family and community leadership. Implications illuminate the importance of supporting and honoring Black feminist leadership approaches to sustain racial equity work as well as insights about designing for systemic sustainability amidst the constant shifts of leadership, resources, and organizational structures in an urban school district in the U.S. West. Efforts to evolve the RCPP's practices resulted in a set of design principles that represent an emergent, collective strategy to create conditions for solidarity-driven co-design amidst retrenchment from equity work.

**Keywords:** research practice partnerships; racial equity; Black families; community-based organizations; Black women's leadership

### **Colaborar para construir un lugar de pertenencia para familias negras: Liderazgo sistémico de mujeres negras en una era de retrocesos**

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza cómo una alianza entre investigación, comunidad y práctica (RCPP, por sus siglas en inglés), liderada principalmente por mujeres negras del distrito escolar y de la comunidad, enfrentó desafíos sistémicos al trabajo por la equidad racial y creó condiciones para el diseño conjunto con familias y comunidades negras. A partir del análisis de datos de reuniones de planificación con líderes distritales, familias, socios comunitarios e investigadores universitarios, discutimos tres hallazgos relacionados con los esfuerzos de nuestra RCPP por fomentar condiciones para un aprendizaje inicial centrado en la justicia y pro-negro, en colaboración con familias negras y educadores: 1) la capacidad de las mujeres negras líderes para "leer" las desigualdades sistémicas dinámicas enraizadas históricamente; 2) el liderazgo y la creación de espacios de pertenencia por parte de mujeres negras en la RCPP para co-crear un hogar; y 3) el liderazgo de los socios comunitarios en la evolución de nuestras prácticas de colaboración para valorar mejor el liderazgo familiar y comunitario. Las implicaciones iluminan la importancia de apoyar y valorar los enfoques de liderazgo feminista negro para sostener el trabajo por la equidad racial, así como aportes sobre cómo diseñar sostenibilidad sistémica en medio de los constantes cambios de liderazgo, recursos y estructuras organizativas en un distrito escolar urbano del oeste de EE. UU. Los esfuerzos por transformar las prácticas de la RCPP resultaron en un conjunto de principios de diseño que representan una estrategia colectiva emergente para generar condiciones de co-diseño impulsado por la solidaridad en un contexto de retroceso en el trabajo por la equidad.

**Palabras clave:** alianzas entre investigación y práctica; equidad racial; familias negras; organizaciones comunitarias; liderazgo de mujeres negras

### **Parcerias para criar um lar para famílias negras: Liderança sistêmica de mulheres negras em uma era de retrocessos**

**Resumo:** Este artigo examina como uma parceria entre pesquisa, comunidade e prática (RCPP) liderada principalmente por mulheres negras, tanto da liderança distrital quanto da comunidade, enfrentou desafios sistêmicos ao trabalho em prol da equidade racial e criou condições para o co-desenho com famílias e comunidades negras. Com base na análise de dados de reuniões de planejamento com líderes distritais, famílias, parceiros comunitários e pesquisadores universitários, discutimos três achados relacionados aos esforços da nossa RCPP para promover condições que favoreçam uma aprendizagem inicial em alfabetização centrada na justiça e com foco no protagonismo negro, em parceria com famílias e educadores negros: 1) a capacidade das líderes negras de "ler" as desigualdades dinâmicas do sistema enraizadas historicamente; 2) a liderança das mulheres negras e a criação de espaços de pertencimento na RCPP para cocriar um lar; e 3) a liderança dos parceiros comunitários na evolução de nossas práticas de parceria para melhor

reconhecer o protagonismo das famílias e da comunidade. As implicações destacam a importância de apoiar e valorizar abordagens de liderança feminista negra como forma de sustentar o trabalho pela equidade racial, além de oferecer reflexões sobre como projetar sustentabilidade sistêmica diante de mudanças constantes na liderança, nos recursos e nas estruturas organizacionais de um distrito escolar urbano no oeste dos Estados Unidos. Os esforços para aprimorar as práticas da RCPP resultaram em um conjunto de princípios de design que representam uma estratégia coletiva emergente para criar condições de co-design baseado na solidariedade em meio ao retrocesso nas iniciativas de equidade.

**Palavras-chave:** parcerias entre pesquisa e prática; equidade racial; famílias negras; organizações comunitárias; liderança de mulheres negras

### **Partnering to Make a Homeplace for Black Families: Black Women's Systemic Leadership in an Era of Retrenchment**

Urban cities in the western United States (US) are largely known for their progressive sociopolitical climate; however, these dynamics are matched with the continued displacement of long-standing Native, Black, Asian, Pasifika and Latinx communities (Beadie et al., 2017; Green et al., 2022; Shange, 2019), and coordinated backlash to racially progressive education policies (e.g., *Parents Involved in Community Schools* [2007]; *School Board Takeovers by Conservative Parents* [Natanson, 2022]). While many districts have maintained discursive commitments to racial equity, widespread budget deficits have unduly impacted racial equity initiatives and district-level staff dedicated to improving equity and justice in school systems, revealing stark systemic contradictions. Notably, Black women and women of color are often at the forefront of racial equity work in U.S. school systems, and thus disproportionately affected by retrenching organizational commitments to racial equity (Ishimaru et al., 2022b). Even in seemingly progressive cities in the US, the current anti-equity socio-political milieu in tandem with unprecedented post-pandemic “churn” has presented challenges to researchers partnering with schools and communities to realize more just and joyful learning, especially with and for Black children and families.

This paper examines how a racial justice-focused research-community-practice partnership (RCPP) in the U.S. West navigated systemic contradictions in efforts to create the conditions for co-designing with Black families, communities and educators to support Black boys’ critical literacy learning. The district we collaborated with, Urbanville District (pseudonym), held clear discursive commitments prioritizing racial equity and Black boys’ well-being and learning, while it simultaneously retrenched from structural support for this work including undermining Black women’s leadership that sought to make stated commitments tangible and real in the district. We seek to explore:

- 1) How did an RCPP in an urban district seek to foster systemic conditions for co-designing more just and joyful early literacy learning with Black families and communities?
- 2) How did the partnership seek to address systemic tensions and evolve more equitable practices amidst racialized systemic retrenchment from equity work?

Amid shifting district realities and retrenching organizational commitments to equity, we drew on the race-conscious, iterative inquiry of participatory co-design methodologies (Bang & Vossoughi,

2016) to “re-mediate” adult collective learning and systems change to enable and sustain holistic Black youth learning.

In what follows, we frame the organized policy-driven resistance and local anti-equity politics that have affected racial equity work in school districts as “orchestrated distractions” (Gooden et al., 2022). Drawing from Black feminist theory, we especially examine Black women’s leadership approaches to make spaces of relationality, resistance, and learning that nurtured possibilities for our work with Black families in Urbanville and local communities more broadly. Amid fraught local and national sociopolitical challenges to racial equity work in education, our analyses illuminate three findings about our RCPP’s efforts to address systemic tensions and foster conditions for co-designing justice-centered, pro-Black early literacy learning with Black families and educators: 1) Black women leaders’ ability to “read” the historically-rooted dynamic inequities of the system; 2) Black women’s leadership and placemaking in the RCPP to co-create homeplace; and 3) community partners’ leadership in evolving our partnership practices to better honor family and community leadership. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings through a set of design principles that resulted from our efforts to evolve our practices. The design principles represent our collective strategy to create conditions for solidarity-driven co-design amid changing institutional actors and logics of racial (in)equity. We also discuss the importance of Black feminist approaches to leadership with implications for how RCPPs can support racial equity work often led by Black women and women of color. We begin by discussing the history of our Research-Community-Practice Partnership and efforts to intentionally evolve our partnership and practice to center the expertise of families and communities.

### **From Research-Practice Partnership to Research-Community-Practice Partnership**

Initially a long-standing research-practice partnership (RPP) between university faculty members and leaders in Urbanville District, our infrastructure expanded to an RCPP (Research-Community-Practice Partnership) in Fall 2021. As an RPP, university-based collaborators partnered with Urbanville District and the local teachers’ union from 2015 to 2019. During this time, the RPP focused on school-based racial equity teams as a bottom-up initiative to develop educator understandings and capacity for racially equitable change. The RPP also gathered systemic data about culturally responsive practices and organizational conditions for racial equity work in schools. When Covid-19 hit, the RPP then pivoted to center the experiences of Black families and justice-focused educators navigating pandemic remote schooling. This effort found that familial expertise and community resources nurtured children’s brilliance in remote learning amidst profound challenges, yet, Black youth, family and community voices were lacking in district decision-making. These findings highlighted the need to enlist the expertise of Black and other racially minoritized communities to further educational justice in Urbanville (Li et al., 2025). During the 2021-2022 academic year, a collaborative pilot also aimed at fostering identity-affirming and just learning environments with Black students and families was implemented at two Urbanville elementary schools.

From 2020 on, Black women district leaders, many of whom led racial equity work in Urbanville, were at the center of this partnership. Collectively, they motivated the shift to focus on Black students and families given their professional roles and personal commitments to supporting the learning and well-being of Black students, families, and communities. This shift then motivated efforts to intentionally develop our governance and infrastructure to expand into an ongoing research-community-practice partnership (RCPP). We partnered with two Black-led community-

based organizations (CBO's) that engage in ongoing advocacy work and critical literacies programming serving Black children and families. Aligned with district initiatives to support Black boy's literacy learning, through these community partnerships we sought to better understand and recognize the deep commitments of African and African American communities to education and literacy that are tightly bound with freedom-seeking, cultural practices, and collective well-being (Givens, 2021; Kinloch & Burkhard., 2020). Further, our shift sought to more holistically address students' and families' ecosystems of learning and belonging. Through a series of regular meetings, retreats, and a culminating project launch, we collaborated toward a new phase of joint inquiry seeking to create conditions for co-designing critical early literacy practices with Black families, communities, and educators to realize more racially equitable teaching and learning that permeates home-community school boundaries and expands from local to systemic contexts.

### **Toward Research-*Community*-Practice Partnerships**

In theory, partnerships between researchers, practitioners, families, and communities are well poised to support systems in responding to fast-shifting and politically contested educational and communal contexts. Such RPPs, and their sibling RCPPs, focus on problems of practice and data use in iterative inquiry cycles that seek to foster reciprocity and expand expertise beyond that of the academy to advance equitable outcomes for students (Farrell et al., 2023). However, disregard for institutional and local histories and hierarchies in racially oppressive systems can merely reinforce inequities in RPPs (Tanksley & Estrada, 2022). A small but burgeoning body of RPP research foregrounds racial justice as both a central pursuit and a set of organizational and relational stances in their partnering processes (Ishimaru et al., 2022a; Smith et al., 2023).

RPPs have enabled researchers and practitioners to co-construct and democratize locally derived research evidence and innovations to inform district strategic actions and decision-making (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Tseng, 2012). However, power dimensions informed by race, gender, class, age, and institutional affiliation can influence research processes (Tanksley & Estrada, 2022). Research has shown the need for RPPs to directly address racial injustices in education and communities through approaches that acknowledge the impacts of settler colonialism, anti-blackness, and "systems of race, gender, and class oppression" (Ishimaru et al., 2022a; Smith et al., 2023; Tanksley & Estrada, 2022, p. 5). This requires moving from technical and race-evasive approaches within oppressive systems to privileging the expertise and knowledge of global majority youth, families, and communities. Critical theoretical frames such as Black Feminist thought emphasize lived experience as theory, and essential to creating more liberatory practices and futures in local contexts (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990). Such approaches are integral to racial equity-focused transformation via RPPs, providing lenses to interrogate political and normative dimensions that constrain educational leadership and to uplift Black and other racially minoritized communities' educational and social experiences (Doucet, 2019; Smith et al., 2023).

Regressive political dynamics and shifting commitments to racial and educational equity influenced our RCPP's efforts toward racial justice. At times, differing institutional norms and logics surfaced within our partnership, encouraging us to clarify our shared values and the possibilities and pitfalls of partnering across district, university, and community contexts. However, our intentional shift to partner with community-based organizations proved integral to our efforts to sustain racial equity work amid systemic constraints. Thus, we focus on our collective learning and necessary shifts to create conditions for co-designing with Black boys, their families, community partners, educators, and district leaders to build more culturally affirming literacy learning and racially equitable systems.

## Racial Equity Work in a *Passive Progressive* Context

We ground our work in the U.S. West and Urbanville District, a regional and local context often noted for progressive social and racial politics. Indeed, when compared to other U.S. regions and public school systems, there are notable policies and practices that have facilitated more equitable educational practice. For instance, most West Coast states have adopted ethnic studies curriculum requirements or frameworks, while some school districts and municipalities have proposed and implemented equity-oriented initiatives designed to support racially minoritized students, families, and communities (Chatmon & Watson, 2018; Welton et al., 2023). However, the U.S. West is a politically diverse region, where institutional and municipal politics can differ from urban-centered trends or the grassroots priorities of local collectives or coalitions. Even in educational and communal contexts with racially progressive policies, implementation can be fraught, contested, and “actually undermine its intended goals” (Lewis-Durham, 2020; Welton et al., 2023, p. 22).

Political pushback and derailment of racial justice work can play out in school systems particularly through less visible forms of resistance such as the changing priorities of district leaders or an inability to confront problematic and racially unjust systemic practices and norms (Villavicencio et al., 2022). Further, neoliberal practices in education such as high stakes testing or techno-rational driven school closures that disproportionately harm communities of color, can inform what Lewis-Durham (2020) calls “nouveau equity policies.” Nouveau equity policies “use obvious equity language and are seemingly situated among meaningful equity initiatives that pay attention to different experiences and outcomes for marginalized students... (however) they maintain White innocence and preserve color blindness” (p. 5). Such policies minimize the necessary responsibility of White folks and institutions founded in white supremacist logics to redress racial oppression and power dynamics affecting Black and other racially minoritized students and families.

School districts can outwardly present racially progressive discourse, while internally maintaining the racial status-quo (Green, 2023). Covert or internal resistance to racial equity work in school districts is often less visible than conservative parent groups protesting at school board meetings or lists of banned books. Nevertheless, discursive strategies or speech acts that state commitments and positive intent toward diversity, equity, inclusion, and even racial justice can obscure how inequities and injustice persist (Lewis-Durham, 2020). The effects of covert or status quo resistance remain pervasive and are often most felt by district level staff, students, families, and communities who steward racial equity work within systemic and communal contexts (Lewis et al., 2023; Villavicencio et al., 2022; Welton et al., 2023).

The aforementioned dynamics constitute *orchestrated distractions* that function as tools of white supremacy and settler colonial ideologies in equity-driven systems change work (Gooden et al., 2022). Orchestrated distractions to racial equity work tap historically rooted systems of oppression that happen in context-driven ways (Shange, 2019) and can create conditions for unabashed racism to resurface amid national politics seeking to suppress equity progress. Although this study took place prior to the current sociopolitical moment, we situate these distractions as scaffolding for a broader attack that continues to play out across U.S. education. Nationally, tactics include executive orders targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and policies such as terminating equity related offices in the federal government and cancelling equity focused grants and contracts that directly support civil rights protections in K-12 and higher education. For example, executive orders have directly targeted anti-racist and gender affirming education policies and practices by labeling efforts to address “white privilege,” “unconscious bias,” or the needs of non-binary students as “discriminatory equity ideology,” and an “indoctrination strategy” (Executive Order No. 14190, 2025). Further, the effects of recent executive orders have also targeted racially minoritized

immigrant students, families, and communities through increased surveillance, detainment, and deportation (Broadwater & Kanno-Youngs, 2025).

Executive orders have created formidable barriers to equity work and dismantled long-fought-for equity gains. Still, our national political climate is impacting schools in state-specific and localized ways. Several West Coast states, among others, have filed lawsuits against the federal government citing the illegal and unconstitutional nature of many executive orders (Happold et al., 2025). State education agencies and superintendents have also issued guidance to schools on protecting undocumented students and families, in addition to maintaining equity initiatives (Jones, 2025; West, 2025). Even so, orchestrated distractions can persist in more politically progressive places by district leaders and administrators being side-tracked from racial equity efforts due to a hyper-focus on academic outcomes or the disproportionate effects of fiscal shortfalls (Lewis-Durham, 2020). Moreover, executive orders can contribute to a climate of fear and inaction given individuals' and organizations' uncertainty about changing or ambiguous laws, a loss of funding, or the threat of retaliatory acts against equity work (e.g. doxing, fear of job loss, threat of physical violence). The convergence of authoritarian and anti-equity backlash with post-pandemic budget deficits can particularly exacerbate the "organizational double jeopardy" that already undermines the influence and impact of Black women in systemic equity leadership roles (Ishimaru et al., 2022b).

### **Creating Homeplace: Politics of Black Women's Leadership and Racial Equity Work**

A long legacy exists of Black women's leadership toward equity and justice in places including, but not limited to their homes, work settings, and local communities (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990; Roumell & James-Gallaway, 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). This labor has included stewarding fugitive or counter-public spaces where more liberatory imaginaries, possibilities, and learning are created within and beyond dominant systems and logics (Files et al., 2024; Nickson, 2021; Roumell & James Gallaway, 2021).

We learn from bell hook's (1990) theorization of "homeplace" as sites constructed by Black women for community members to be restored, affirmed, and in community. We particularly engage placemaking to illuminate Black women's collective strategies and moves to create community for Black families and students to codesign homeplaces. Justice-centered placemaking refers to the multifaceted ways that collectives vision and (re)make spaces toward collective care and thriving (hooks, 1990; Nickson, 2021).

#### **Black Feminist Leadership: A Personal and Communal Praxis**

Black women school and community leaders often view caretaking as a communal activity, serving as othermothers, or mother figures to children within educational and community contexts (Collins, 2000). Within educational contexts, this can include a focus on building relationships with families and communities, promoting equitable participation in school and district decision-making, loving and nurturing the development of children, and fostering dialogue that brings to light issues of race and gender power dynamics (Horsford, 2012; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). Many Black women educational and community leaders take the work of racial justice as their personal and communal responsibility, so they use "their positions as a means to engage in professional praxis" (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021, p. 12), critical care, and activism that remains vital to Black children, families, and communities' survival, wellbeing, learning, and experiences of joy (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990). However, Black women face challenges due to racial, gendered, and classed oppressions, which impacts their ability to bring about systemic change (Crenshaw, 1991; Ishimaru et al., 2022; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021; Smith et al., 2023).

In our partnership, Whitney, head of the department in Urbanville district that serves Black boys and their families, narrated experiences of having to justify her position as a Black woman leading a department serving Black boys, instead of a Black male who could provide gender representation to students. However, questioning her suitability as the department director undermines the reality that many Black women are at the helm of racial equity work because of their distinct commitments to community and freedom for all people (Files et al., 2024; McGuire et al., 2023). Files and collaborators (2024) highlight that “Black women became architects of family and community. They actively subverted and challenged the disconnective violence of slavery by preserving and nurturing kinship” (p. 5). As such, McGuire, Edwards, and Dancy (2023) assert that Black feminist thought is, “urgent to how we understand Black boys and men’s experiences in U.S. schools, colleges, and society, and, perhaps more importantly, mapping freedom from them” (p. 119). In a similar vein, “othermothering” and “homeplaces” illuminate how Black feminist approaches are vital to educational leadership.

### **Honoring Families’ and Communities’ Expertise**

One of the ways that Black women leaders inside systems realize their commitments to Black students, families, and communities is to elevate their voices and knowledge to position them as central partners in transforming systems to become more just and affirming educational environments (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). Despite the challenges they face due to racialized systems of oppression, Black families and other families of color possess valuable knowledge and expertise that can enhance schools’ teaching and learning processes and contribute to the learning and thriving of their children. This expertise is rooted in their unique lived experiences, ancestral knowledges, and cultural practices, which are frequently overlooked or denigrated in conventional educational settings (Ishimaru et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2018). This project grows from the premise that familial home, cultural, political, and religious practices offer crucial insights into the expansive and critical ways that families and communities engage literacies that counter deficit-based narratives about Black boys and their families (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). We also sought to recognize and leverage the sophisticated translanguaging of both African American and African immigrant youth (Omogun & Skerrett, 2021).

However, leveraging Black families’ expertise requires reckoning with deeply inequitable and often harmful systemic conditions and histories (Ishimaru, 2020). The powered mechanisms and norms that shape status quo school engagements with Black families typically echo long histories of disregard, disinvestment, and blame. For instance, school closures disproportionately impact Black and Latinx communities, and educational decision-makers often dismiss the organized resistance of youth and families in the face of those decisions as trouble-making emblematic of stereotyped notions about impeding student learning (Ewing, 2018; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). A Black feminist approach reframes this resistance as powerful forms of collective advocacy and leadership, but the dominant narratives around parent and family engagement in schools are deeply entrenched in historically rooted dynamics of racialized oppression and colonization.

Typical school engagement often reinforces normative power dynamics between educators and Black families, impeding meaningful collaboration and sustaining structural inequities (Baxley, 2024; Ishimaru et al., 2023). Conventional approaches to so-called academic “partnerships” with families of color tend to position them as missing, empty or deficient (Ishimaru, 2020), implicitly to blame for systemic inequities. In light of such treatment, Black families’ generational experiences of school systems are often characterized by marginalization, alienation, and decision-making that reinforces systematic disinvestment in their children and schools (Downing, 2024). In relation to this study in particular, school-based family literacy interventions often function as a form of

colonization that privileges English texts and forms of literacy as well as white middle-class normative behaviors and supports (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023). In Urbanville, such dynamics were present through a focus on the “science of reading,” an approach often implemented in ways that center technical literacy skills without acknowledging learner’s diverse identities and expansive literacy strengths (Milner, 2020).

Yet, Black feminist leadership has always extended beyond the four walls of formal educational institutions. As “architects” of family and community (Files et al., 2024), Black women both in and outside of schools enact *community* leadership as they center the learning and wellbeing of children. Community-based organizational partners can serve as crucial intermediaries between families, communities, and schools (Warren, 2005). Although neoliberal contexts shape complex, racialized terrain for their work, community-based organizations are often uniquely positioned to foster dialogue between educators and families while advocating and centering youth and community needs and priorities (Baldrige et al., 2017; Miller, 2022; Nickson, 2021). To create the conditions for partnering with Black families without reproducing the dynamics of inequity, we leveraged communities’ expertise and sought to adopt an integrated approach centered on community and family knowledges to cultivate thriving partnerships grounded in politicized trust (Vakil et al., 2016) and a shared vision for educational change.

## Methods

Our observation and document data largely stem from our work as an RCPP from Fall 2022 to Spring 2023.<sup>1</sup> As previously mentioned, we shifted from an RPP to RCPP and embarked on a new focus to support Black boys’ critical literacy learning and Black families’ transformative agency through co-design with Black families, educators, community partners, and educational leaders in Urbanville District. We engaged participatory design research (PDR) methodologies (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), rooted in race and equity-focused sociocultural learning theories and design methods, such as social change experiments (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010) and formative interventions (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Whereas much of the design, implementation, and improvement work in education focuses on instructional improvement with teachers and school or district leaders, our methodological approach builds on prior efforts to expand design expertise to include families and communities directly impacted by anti-Blackness and other intersectional racial injustices (Ishimaru et al., 2023). We have aimed to leverage co-design processes to foster a shift in the racialized relational dynamics affecting the district and our RCPP. More pointedly, in the thick of challenges, we have experienced our own needed breaks from partnership-as-usual to increase our responsiveness to local sociopolitical dynamics. We further discuss these challenges throughout our findings section.

The co-design process for our RCPP happened at two distinct levels: the system-level and the local-level, both focused on fostering equitable family-school collaboration and expansive, critical learning environments for children. The system-level co-design refers to the process among district leaders, community partners, and university researchers. These were planning meetings that began in Fall 2021 to co-design a project focused on early literacy learning with Black families and communities. The local-level co-design refers to monthly sessions held with Black boys, their families, educators, school leaders, and the RCPP team to create identity-affirming, critical literacy practices and materials. The local-level co-design

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<sup>1</sup> This study was approved by the University of Washington’s Institutional Review Board (Study ID: STUDY00016336).

launched in June 2023, and the system-level co-design team continued to meet regularly throughout this time.

Although we shifted from an RPP to RCPP in 2021, the first year involved district leaders and university researchers strategizing how to build an RCPP and identifying and inviting community partners. For this article, we focus solely on data from the system-level co-design meetings between Fall 2022 (the start of community partners involvement in the RCPP) and Spring 2023 (the launch of the local-level co-design). We draw on data from 21 system-level co-design planning meetings and retreats (about 45 hours of audio recordings derived from in-person audio recorders and zoom recordings). The focus of this data is how we fostered systemic conditions for co-designing more just and joyful early literacy learning with Black families and communities, and how we sought to address systemic tensions to evolve more equitable practices amidst racialized systemic retrenchment from equity work. Co-design planning meetings were attended by district leaders, community partners, and university researchers. All Urbanville district leaders and community partners have been given pseudonyms. District partners particularly included Urbanville district leaders dedicated to nurturing early literacy learning and the cultural and academic strengths of Black male students through holistic and community engaged approaches. These meetings involved robust conversation and dialogue where we planned our co-design work (e.g. discussing how to best communicate and engage families toward shared leadership, analyzing shifting sociopolitical contexts affecting Urbanville and local communities, and working to build and strengthen relationships with one another). Importantly, our work together often embraced an ethic of care (Collins, 2000), which included RCPP members building relationships with one another outside of district spaces via community events like participating in Freedom Schools Read-Aloud, children attending meetings with their parents, and providing food at in-person meetings. Additional data include the launch of our co-design work with families and educators. To a lesser extent, we also include artifacts (e.g. our RCPP emergent design principles, chart paper with collective planning notes, etc.) to further contextualize our work.

We employed dialogic and team-based approaches to analyze the data, aimed at shared interpretation and understanding among different RCPP members (Guest & MacQueen, 2008). In light of conversations within the RCPP co-design meetings, university researchers then collaborated to construct and refine a codebook. We began with a set of deductive codes based on our research questions, including codes for problem-solving moments within the partnership and relationship building. The initial set of codes were iterated upon by the RCPP as the university researchers routinely shared key quotes and excerpts from the data to spur group reflection and dialogue. RCPP members collectively narrated pivotal moments, tensions, and shifts in our work together, and their understandings of internal and external racial politics influencing our efforts.

After drafting the initial list of codes, university researchers used Dedoose software to independently code co-design meeting transcripts and write short analytic memos with wonderings about codes, emerging themes, and questions necessary for clarifying our collaboration and processes. The university research team then met several times to clarify, combine, and/or expand code definitions and applications of codes (Guest & MacQueen, 2008). These meetings involved extensive dialogue, question posing, and a calibration of our independent coding across transcripts and fieldnotes. Our revised codebook addressed RCPP practices, such as surfacing community partners' expertise and relationship building, along with systemic challenges pertaining to limited capacity, staff turnover, and gender dynamics, among others. Although community partners and district leaders were involved in developing our

initial set of codes, the university research team took the lead on coding the data and synthesizing key findings. These findings were then brought back to the RCPP team for reflection and member checking (Miles et al., 2014).

The aim of our interactive and relational approach to data analysis was to track key themes, dynamics, tensions, and breakthroughs in our system-level efforts with attention to sociopolitical factors affecting Urbanville and local contexts in order to plan for the local-level co-design with Black families. In other words, the overall purpose of our analysis of the system-level co-design is to make sense of the challenges of co-designing as an RCPP amidst the retrenchment of racial equity work, and the openings and conditions fostered to ultimately make possible our collaboration with Black families and schools.

## **Findings**

### **“Reading” the Dynamic Inequities of the System**

As head of the department in Urbanville district that serves Black boys and families, Whitney would often narrate her commitment to launching the office with the voices, priorities, concerns, and aspirations of Black boys and young men. When the office was launched in 2019 with enthusiastic fanfare and all-private funding, her team spent more than a year conducting listening sessions and interviews to hear, in their own words, what Black boys and young men—referred to as Kings to honor students’ culture, power, and potential—themselves wanted from adults, educators, and schools to succeed academically and educationally. The resulting report and strategic plan highlighted four key areas of work: joyful, safe, and pro-Black learning environments; Black education and identity affirming classroom instruction; strong relationships and Black educator representation; and family and community engagement. However, not long after the release of the report, her team was instructed to focus their energies on addressing the “gap” in Black boys’ 3rd grade English Language Arts achievement scores relative to their white classmates. Whitney struggled to see how it fit with what the Kings had shared. The current iteration of the RCPP grew out of the prior Research-Practice Partnership whose focus on partnering with racial equity teams in Urbanville pivoted to center Black families’ experiences during the pandemic. Whitney and her department joined the RCPP as we collectively sought to build from pandemic efforts and bridge the achievement gap-focused “3rd Grade Reading Goal” with the identity-affirming pro-Black voices and priorities of the Kings.

Following the collaborative pilot in the previous academic year, our team prepared to relaunch co-design work in Fall 2022. However, multiple challenges arose. Our efforts to relaunch were met with the halting of federal funds distributed to school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic and declining student enrollment, which created substantial financial deficits. These fiscal constraints spurred layoffs, organizational restructuring, proposed school closures, and an overall climate of uncertainty. In several cases, curricular and extracurricular programming that has proven effective and valuable to Black and other racially minoritized students and families was decreased or cut, provoking outrage and resistance within communities. Beloved leaders, particularly several Black women district leaders (including a founding member of the Research-Practice Partnership) and staff deeply committed to the well-being of Black students and families, were either laid off or chose to depart the district in response to these challenges. Additionally, a teachers’ strike at the beginning of the academic year further strained district leaders’ capacity. After a delay to the academic year, a school shooting of a Black teen in the fall introduced additional urgent demands affecting Urbanville and district leaders.

Members of our partnership—particularly Black women—reflected upon delays to launching work with families by “reading” the dynamics of the system, an act of critical literacy informed by their raced, gendered, and classed experiences (Collins, 2000). They expressed, “the ground was constantly shifting,” and “everything was stressful...so much was changing, people were gone (i.e. the departure of a critical district leader driving racial equity work), things are moving.” Black women leaders at the heart of the RCPP were able to understand fast-changing political dynamics and when the “system was systeming,” or, in other words, when the system was operating exactly how it was designed. Institutional scripts and norms that default to race- and gender-evasive decision making in times of uncertainty or precarity exacerbate white supremacist and gendered institutionalized hierarchies (Ishimaru, 2020). These dynamics illuminated consequential gaps between Urbanville discourses espousing racial equity and sustained organizational commitment to racial and educational justice.

In our planning meetings, district leaders often made sense of political factors and the retrenchment of racial equity work. They articulated normative and situational constraints being placed upon them due to budget cuts and standardized system measures (i.e., test scores). For example, Stella, a long-time equity and academic leader in the district particularly discussed the deficit-based use of data, sharing:

We have a data point where we talk about second graders...and how predictive it is for them, as far as how they will succeed on the third grade SBA (Smarter Balanced Assessment). But here we're taking what I call mature first graders [because they are] at the beginning of second grade. You know, we've named them as African American students of color furthest from educational justice. And then we assigned failure to them like that only 33% or 30% predictive are gonna do that [referring to meeting the standard]. And it just feels problematic to me. Like, they haven't even had the education for us to even make a comparison...we're already ascribing failure to the students.

Stella along with other Black women leaders in the district regularly discussed systemic constraints including deficit-based systemic measures, budget constraints, inequitable organizational restructuring, and the disproportionate effects of layoffs on Black women equity leaders in Urbanville. They read how discursive frames such as “students of color furthest from educational justice” were at times decontextualized from the actual strengths and needs of young Black male students, reflecting tensions between equity goals focused on students’ belonging and joy in school and the district’s Student Outcomes Focused Governance (SOFG) approach. SOFG is a framework promoted by the Council of Great Schools to support systems governance that stresses adopting and aligning goals hyper-focused on student outcomes, or what students know, are able to do, or how they perform on standardized tests (Crabill, 2021). Notably, SOFG names the importance of engaging families and communities in this process through gathering community values and goals, however, this framework elevates race-evasive neoliberal metrics by intensely focusing on monitoring and assessing student outcomes and limiting time and space for communities to engage in systems level decision making (Sampson, 2024). This approach can absolve power holders and dominant groups from the type of equity-driven, historically attentive structural change needed to support Black and other racially minoritized students and communities. Moreover, this approach fails to recognize how schools themselves often reproduce racial and economic inequality through a lack of attention to the needs, strengths, and values of racially minoritized families and communities (Lewis-Durham, 2020).

Black women's ability to read systemic dynamics and tensions in Urbanville was an important springboard to their efforts to sustain racial equity work. Importantly, leaders also named and applied strategy toward "opening space" and engaging in "internal work that we need to do, as far as our values, our data literacy, and what's informing how we're describing and talking about the work." Together, leaders found deliberate ways to respond to systemic constraints and to the constantly shifting grounds of the district. We frame these deliberate moves as a Black feminist approach to educational placemaking.

### **Educational Placemaking in Practice: The RCPP and Co-creating Homeplace**

With well-planned agendas and approaches aimed to move us toward building relationships and partnering with Black families in Urbanville, RCPP members month-by-month joined bi-weekly zoom calls. We frequently discussed how to create capacity and design for systemic sustainability, and this included necessary pauses, backtracking, and admittedly frustration as key personnel supporting the work departed and plans were no longer feasible. Members of our partnership became frustrated with system-related delays. Our district leaders were dealing with the direct and indirect impacts of the Urbanville school district's budget deficit, which threatened funding to racial equity programming and resulted in departmental restructuring and job loss. For instance, in late winter 2023, plans were announced to terminate the position of a key leader in Urbanville's research and evaluation department and the RCPP. Camille, a Black woman, was pivotal to the collaborative pilot, and held strong relationships with families, educators, and district leaders toward racially equitable research and assessment practices. As organizational conditions shifted in ways our collective perceived disproportionately affected Black women, group morale and capacity lagged. One district partner expressed that it felt like they were constantly operating in "crisis management mode." There was a strong desire to launch the codesign with families; however, members were struggling to proceed amid uncertainty.

Black women in the RCPP—both district and community leaders—recognized the "limits" of Urbanville's organizational structures and norms, and this was key to fostering creative approaches responsive to shifting organizational conditions. Grounded in relationships and an ethic of care, Black women's leadership approaches provided guidance and direction toward our ability to not only respond to retrenching equity commitments, but to recognize our RCPP as a space of co-creation and possibility. Beyond critique and commiseration, Stella framed:

[The RCPP] launches us into having internal discussions of ways that we can get aligned and can connect, and that maybe we wouldn't be having . . . the siloed ways. . . . and I think the point of co-design is like us trying to think about, okay, what do we want our joint work to be.

Reminding our collective of the creative possibilities and "joint work" central to co-design, Stella encouraged the RCPP to engage in "co-creating" the kinds of realities and futures our group desired by gathering our "expertise" and "resources." Drawing on her relationships with other Black women, Stella then suggested inviting Makda, a Black woman who manages housing partnerships in the district, to join the RCPP. As a Black mother of young children and district and community leader, Makda shared summer programming and community events where Black children and families often connect with one another. She explained, "I always long for the opportunity to connect with other family members. . . . makes a difference in how much comfort I have in my kid being in that space because I know that there's other adults also caring about my kid," indicating the importance of caring adults and community to her children and family's wellbeing (hooks, 1990). Likewise, Ms. Ava, a racial equity leader in Urbanville, sought to expand the boundaries of our work

by considering how school-level racial equity teams might support relationship building with Black families and educators at the three elementary partner schools. Together, we witnessed how Black women leaders drew from their multifaceted identities, roles, and relationships to collaborate and more equitably solve challenges.

Over time and in a non-linear fashion, group consensus developed that our current moment required different ways of relating and collaborating with one another. With growing frustrations about beginning co-design work with families, Whitney cautioned us against replicating systemic logics of urgency and expediency. She expressed the need to tend to “culture building” and “trust,” while acknowledging the “anxiety and stress levels... [and that] we’ve got to get some things done.” Introduced by Stella in earlier iterations of the RCPPs work, we continued leaning into our first design principle to “make Sankofa a routine practice.” In October 2022, two district leaders and one university researcher drafted a set of design principles as a starting set of goals and values for members of the partnership to iterate upon. Sankofa derives from Akan teachings in West Africa meaning “reaching back, retrieving, and bringing forth valuable data and insights,” and informs African American cultural traditions (Karenga, 2018). We engaged Sankofa as a practice to identify how our work connects to histories of institutional oppression and the survivance of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color communities (Vizenor, 2008). Questions such as “How do you stay grounded in the community while doing this work?” and engaging with Jamila Lyiscott’s (2014) TED Talk titled “3 Ways to Speak English” provoked group discussion on RCPP members’ values, intersectional identities, and communal experiences, and our commitment to honoring Black boys and families’ expansive literacy practices. As such, sharing and dialogue beyond responding to systemic conditions or solely planning for co-design efforts helped us remember lineages of collective caretaking and power that are foundational to Black feminist ethics and hooks’ (1990) conception of homeplace. Further, attention to relationships both within and beyond the RCPP oriented us toward the ripe possibilities of co-design when rooted in the positioned knowledges and relationships of the collective.

We aim to uplift Black women’s leadership and ethics of care that guided us in co-creating humanizing routines and relationships in our RCPP and thus make place beyond destabilizing systemic practices and logics. Importantly, this also pertained to community partners who shared distinct expertise and practices consequential to fostering more equitable communication and division of labor.

### **Community Partners’ Leadership**

In Fall 2022, we partnered with two Black-led community-based organizations to expand from an RPP to a RCPP, or research-*community*-practice partnership. Both community partners had extensive experience doing critical literacy work with Black families and children: one organization supported the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools and led a critical literacy summer school for children of color; and the other organization provided literacy development resources and workshops for Black children, families, and community members. These organizations demonstrate the important role community members play in developing expansive literacies, and by partnering with them, we sought to learn from their expertise in creating collaborative, educational spaces. Their leadership was instrumental in building structures and practices to support equitable communication and sustainable divisions of labor within the partnership. We simultaneously designed our early literacy project whilst developing internal processes to flatten hierarchies and create an equitable culture for our partnership, which we further discuss later in this section. Thus, our processes and approaches to partnership were revisited and renegotiated in meetings.

At the beginning stages of our shift to an RCPP, one community partner, Brianna, suggested the creation of a visual representation of the people in the partnership, with, “everybody's roles, connections, strengths, skills, expertise and ability to work with community,” as a way to deepen collaboration through a “greater context of our ecosystem.” Sharing approaches from her work as a youth organizer, Brianna also proposed, “some sort of community agreement is important for any space, that’s what I do with youth that I’m working with at any time.” Brianna invited the RCPP to understand the resources and roles of our space more intentionally, and thus our collective possibilities together. Her organizing sensibilities grounded the importance of practices and routines that support relationality and shared leadership—key aims of co-design—and our ability to work together to support the shifting pieces of preparing for co-design with Black families.

The overarching goal of our early literacy project was to center Black families’ leadership and expertise, and our community partners played an integral role in ensuring we kept that goal in mind as we prepared to launch. The launch of codesign meetings with families was initially scheduled for March 2023. As the date neared, Brianna and other community partners raised concerns about how families were being engaged and the relational aspects of the work. They shared frameworks and timelines they used when planning events and/or engaging with families. Our community partners also ushered us to slow down and revisit our project intentions before we proceeded. To do so, we held a “reset retreat” in lieu of the launch.

The reset retreat helped to reshape our work to focus on supporting system-level capacities and to use the time of delay as an opportunity to further develop understandings of codesign and expansive literacies. The reset was a significant moment for us to revisit ways to undertake our work with integrity even amidst profound challenges. Despite what could be interpreted as a setback, the March retreat highlighted the non-linearity of partnership work, particularly as we worked to embody more equitable forms of partnership. It also aided in shifting group morale from simply working to get the project launched to moving forward with intentionality. To conclude our reset retreat, each RCPP member shared reflections on their feelings and takeaways from our time together. Whitney shared:

I'm going to say it's feeding my soul. Because of all of the things that are going on that are *distractions*. We are doing what we all are passionate about, getting to purpose. Just being inspired that I believe that we will get it together and actually do something on the behalf of our babies, and I'm excited about that.

Other RCPP members expressed “clarity of alignment,” an ability to see “the bigger picture,” and “breath (pause) —this group provides enough and it helps us gather our thoughts to actually look toward the future.” We departed the reset retreat with a renewed sense of purpose and “breath” amid the many distractions and delays encountered throughout the academic year.

Following the reset retreat, the project launch was postponed until June, and we resumed planning. Aiming to be intentional in our planning and engagement with families, the partnership was organized into three sub-teams to manage aspects of the work: a family outreach team, an educators’ team, and communication team. The family outreach team decided community partners would contact families about the forthcoming launch, particularly families with whom they already had connections (given their work with a partnering school). However, in a full partnership meeting, a district leader raised concerns about community partners communicating with families without support or initial outreach coming from a member of the district. The district member explained, “I think we always should have a touch point who is with [Urbanville District] ... and I thought from this team, we would have someone who was connected to [the district] to do the outreach.” Families’ information was protected in a secure database accessible to district personnel, however,

some community partners already had contact with families through community-based programming and educational spaces. The question of who should initiate family outreach surfaced institutional norms that situate district leaders as intermediaries between families and community partners. A key tension remained on how to navigate district protocols while honoring community partners' leadership.

Shortly after this meeting, one of our community partners shared plans to depart the RCPP at the end of the academic year. As a small, youth-led organization they faced competing priorities and had previously experienced challenges partnering with Urbanville. Our RCPP reflected on how we could learn from their feedback and more equitably partner and communicate in the future. Markedly, key RCPP members also expressed uncertainty about systemic norms and routines that are designed to consolidate and maintain institutional power, and the ability to sustain our work given the dominance of district organizational conditions.

### **Strategically Planning for Racial Equity Work in “Passive Progressive” Contexts**

Over the course of the school year, our RCPP navigated various delays and departures to launch an early literacy co-design project with Black families that we make sense of as orchestrated distractions in a passive progressive context. Politicized backlash and retrenchment of racial equity gains motivated by the changing presidential administration, pandemic, and the “racial reckoning” have been explicit and swift, yet public and policy discourses can downplay the ways such dynamics take place in contexts with stated commitments to racial and social justice. Our RCPP and Black women that led our collective experienced the covert or passive retrenchment of racial equity work in Urbanville District in ways that reveal the salience of racial and gender hierarchies to retrenching equity commitments in local contexts.

To address our research questions, we explain how our RCPP design principles guided us in navigating systemic tensions and evolving toward more equitable practice. Intended to be a set of shared values to undergird our work, our design principles were a living document we could actively review to assess our work and update in ways responsive to strengths, challenges, and needs internal and external to the RCPP (see Appendix A for a list of RCPP Emergent Partnership Design Principles). Led by Black women district and community leaders, design principles were instrumental to our collective strategy to create conditions for solidarity-driven co-design amidst retrenchment from equity work. Central to our non-linear learning, design principles included a willingness to slow down and reflect (i.e. Sankofa practice), an emphasis on building solidarities and relationships, and a commitment to flattening hierarchical power structures and tapping diverse expertise. Ongoing systemic tensions and challenges forced us to collaborate and act in ways that enlivened our design principles. Moreover, systemic retrenchment challenged our RCPP to rethink normative practices in Urbanville and our RCPP such as protocols for communicating with families, or how we collaborated with community partners toward co-designing with Black families.

For instance, our fifth design principle: “Lean into tensions that move us toward justice-focused change” became actionable in ways that strained and supported our work to create conditions for co-designing with Black families. On one hand, RCPP members acknowledged the systemic challenges affecting our work and were oftentimes beyond our control. Still, members grappled with collective frustration, a sense of urgency, and at times lost sight of our ability to plan and co-create beyond organizational constraints. Our RCPP—primarily university researchers and district leaders—had to learn to be “okay with messiness,” and we also “committed to collective learning” to better understand and historicize the orchestrated distractions affecting racial equity work. Black and other racially minoritized students, families, and communities have long navigated the intentionally inconsistent and shifting landscape of racial equity endeavors originating from

liberal state institutional contexts (Shange, 2019). Given this reality, shortly after our launch with families, Patrice, a district and community leader, invited a community leader from a local organization to share about their work focused on challenging systemic and institutional barriers affecting East African and African American communities. Informed by the community leader's insight and experiences, we discussed addressing and navigating possibilities and tensions among diverse Black families and youth. In this way, we engaged communal knowledge and leadership to plan toward intersectional approaches to Black families and facilitating pro-Black and multilingual learning spaces. Such conversations proved helpful in our co-design work with Black families where we navigated intergenerational and inter-ethnic conversations with families, students, and educators that expressed an abundance of support and commitment to Black boys' learning and wellbeing, alongside differing orientations toward schooling and literacy practices.

Our shift from RPP to RCPP was another way we sought to safeguard our work against shifting systemic commitments to racial equity work. Throughout the year, we witnessed dynamics that were integral in sustaining our work including how community partners' organizing sensibilities grounded discussions about how to organize divisions of labor by mapping our strengths and skills, slowing down to plan and reflect in light of (un)expected challenges, and prioritizing intentional engagement and communication with families. Additionally, the other partnering organization provided families with pro-Black literacy resources that reflected our dialogue about expansive and critical literacy learning. This aligns with Miller's (2022) study of a Black-led and justice-driven community-based organization where Black youth, families, and community members' multiple knowledges, shared leadership processes, and ethic of care disrupted anti-Blackness in local contexts and provided more just models for pro-Black educational and communal spaces. Recognizing the vital role of CBOs with ongoing commitments to Black children, families, and communities in driving systemic change, we situate racial equity-centered RCPPs in the broader historical arc of racial justice work. A key implication from our work is that community partners are necessary drivers of systemic change amid retrenchment of racial equity work, especially amid governance systems like SOFG that deliberately limit or devalue family and community engagement and advocacy in district governance and leadership. Further, justice-driven community partners can be key in navigating fraught national racial politics by providing guidance and alternate organizational logics on maintaining race-specific, in this case, pro-Black commitments in partnership efforts. Community leaders ensured that we codesigned in ways that kept Black families at the center, rather than systemic demands and priorities.

Black feminist leadership approaches involving an ethic of care, communality, and political development—key to bell hook's (1990) conception of homeplace—were also vital in our RCPPs ability to make a place to support conditions for co-designing with Black families. Within oppressive contexts, spaces of organizing, care, creativity, and resistance can and do exist and people themselves co-create these places (hooks, 1990; Nickson, 2021). Our data suggest that Black women's "angles of vision" or "outsider within" status (Collins, 2000, p. 12) helped us map toward co-designing with Black families in ways that disrupted a culture of urgency and honored RCPP members' relationship building, lived experiences, and need to move beyond discourse to action.

We emphasize the importance of Black women's leadership approaches, while also cautioning against the harmful ways we witnessed Black women leaders taxed by systemic conditions. Black women district leaders in Urbanville dealt with the challenge of having limited capacity. Their schedules were frequently consumed by immediate problem-solving, back-to-back meetings, and the expectation that they were solely responsible for the success of Black boys, and more broadly, Black and other racially minoritized students across Urbanville. Further, Black women leaders were heavily affected by budgetary constraints and layoffs. This dichotomy underscores the

systemic obstacles Black women leaders face and the resilience required to pursue systemic change in education (Peters & Miles-Nash, 2021; Smith et al., 2023).

Uplifting how Black (other)mothers nurture needed transgressive dispositions in Black boys in anti-Black institutions, Files and collaborators (2024) narrate that the “work of nurturing, which is relational work, is heavy” (p. 19). They further explain “This is not (Black) ‘women’s work,’ this is the work for men and for us all” (p. 25). Thus, strategically planning and nurturing racial equity work in passive progressive contexts—where Black women are often lauded for their insight and leadership yet are under supported and undermined—requires marshaling appropriate resources to support their development and work. Smith and colleagues (2023) explain that this can include the strategic use of resources (i.e. money, time, relationships, and trust) in R(C)PPs. Amid layoffs and widespread uncertainty in Urbanville that especially affected Black women equity leaders, we were able to repurpose grant funds to maintain key Black women’s leadership and insight in the RCPP. We also hired a former Urbanville principal and racial equity consultant, Rachel, a white woman, who supported district leaders in visioning and coordinating with principals, educators, and families at partnering elementary schools. Her work was integral in maintaining communication with educators and families after our launch and alleviating strain experienced by school leaders given competing priorities or a lack of personnel to support this work.

We emphasize the call to acknowledge and honor the necessity of Black feminist thought to the development and well-being of Black boys and their communities (Files et al., 2024; McGuire et al., 2023). This important stance recognizes the political care and complex labor of many Black women in communal and professional spaces, while shedding light on pathways to foster systems, communities, and homes that resist the prevalence of anti-blackness, patriarchy, and misogynoir that are foundational to the retrenchment and destabilization of racial justice leadership and work.

## **Conclusion**

Current sociopolitical contexts in education have posed challenges and risks for educators, scholars, and communities collaborating to foster more racially and socially just educational systems. Amplified by recent executive orders, these challenges exhaust Black families and communities—including district leaders, educators, and community partners—who have experienced displacement, educational harms, and the loss of beloved community leaders and resources that precede school districts’ efforts and discourse toward racial equity. We seek to contribute to broadening racial equity discourses in systemic contexts and sustaining leadership efforts often stewarded by Black women to improve and expand equity and justice efforts in “passive progressive” educational systems and policy contexts. The evolving anti-equity national context demands collective strategy and solidarities to navigate the retrenchment of racial equity work. In certain contexts where the threat of violence and harm is heightened, this may mean engaging “fugitive” or less legible approaches to dominant governance structures (Givens, 2021). While in other contexts, it may mean staying the course and maintaining open and direct commitments to this work to avoid co-optation and ineffectual equity discourse. With racial politics no longer characterized by race evasive or race neutral discourses, we must tend to local political dynamics and histories to understand how to (re)vision our commitments and collaborative research toward racial equity.

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## Appendix A

### RCPP Emergent Partnership Design Principles

**CODESIGNING  
BLACK  
FAMILY-  
EDUCATOR  
EARLY  
LITERACIES**

These are emergent partnership commitments for our Research-Community-Practice Partnership. These are living, ongoing commitments that we revisit and revise.

**MAKE SANKOFA A ROUTINE PRACTICE**

- Our work relates to histories of institutional oppression & the survivance of BIPOC communities
- We explicitly address anti-Blackness and racism
- We design from a starting point of brilliance
- We show up as our full selves

**BUILD FROM THE PRIORITIES AND DREAMS OF BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

- We start with the stories and specific visions of those on the ground
- Kings, Families and communities are part of key deliberations and decision-making

**BUILD SOLIDARITIES & INTERSECTIONAL JUSTICE**

- We build and cultivate reciprocity and humanizing relationships
- We intentionally bring in partners who center Black possibility & brilliance
- We develop politicized trust over time

**FLATTEN HIERARCHICAL POWER & TAP DIVERSE EXPERTISE**

- We modify consensus decision-making, except for organizationally-specific issues
- We differentiate participation based on interest, time, and capacity
- We rotate meeting facilitation and integrate feedback loops, mechanisms for updates & sharing

**LEAN INTO TENSIONS THAT MOVE US TOWARDS JUSTICE-FOCUSED CHANGE**

- We are okay with messiness
- We critique to build, not to perform or pontificate
- We are committed to our collective learning

**CREATE PATHWAYS FOR PROJECT TO INTEGRATE INTO ONGOING WORK OF SCHOOLS/COMMUNITIES**

- We continue to de-silo the work and look for opportunities and work to integrate our learning into other spaces and efforts
- Everyone takes responsibility for leading and sharing the work