

Reimagining & Transforming the Future of Education Research Together

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Introduction

Research practice partnerships (RPPs) and collaborative research have the potential to center the lived experiences and realities of communities often marginalized in the production of research, and further create pathways to ensure that research is responsive to what the *community itself* wants and needs (Doucet, 2019). RPPs also strive to recognize the cumulative expertise and perspectives each stakeholder brings to problems and resolutions (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014; Snow, 2015). Despite the promises of these approaches that prioritize social and racial justice and the voices of communities, conducting an effective RPP is challenging work, especially for graduate students and emerging scholars (Denner et al., 2019; Wegemer & Renick, 2021). To address this challenge, graduate students across multiple universities in the United States created the RESHAPE (Rising Educational Scholars Helping Advance Partnerships and Equity) Network to help early scholars navigate through these challenges and form supportive networks to increase more equitable, community-grounded research designs and approaches.

In our roles as graduate students, teachers, researchers, community members, activists, family members, and much more - this special issue of *The Assembly* aims to share the breadth of knowledge and collaborative efforts across our institutions, as we reimagine and work towards transforming the field of education and RPPs to be anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and de-colonial. For us, the pandemic has become a catalyst, presenting the opportunity for this group of scholars to center collective care in research, to cultivate ideas, and to explore common values and goals of what authentic, communal scholarship could look like. The idea for this issue of *The Assembly* began as part of the 2021 RESHAPE Conference as part of a focused mentoring experience for graduate students and early career scholars. In what follows, we will describe the origins of the RESHAPE network and the design of the conference. While not all of the article authors attended the RESHAPE conference, all of the articles seek to reimagine community research - from hardships to new understandings - to offer possibility, inspiration, and connection for potential paths forward.

About The RESHAPE Network

The RESHAPE network brings together graduate students and early career scholars around collaborative research, with a specific focus on advancing equity and justice in education. “Collaborative research” is an umbrella term, encompassing research-practice partnerships (Penuel et al., 2015), community-based design research (Bang et al., 2016), social design experiments (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016), and other approaches that seek to dismantle unjust hierarchies and produce theoretical contributions that are relevant to practitioners (Doucet, 2019). RESHAPE’s primary goal is to cultivate a community of emergent collaborative research scholars and practitioners who support one another in their personal and professional endeavors. We provide opportunities for members to collaborate and cultivate stronger relationships built around shared academic interests. We educate each other, creating an ecology of learning and personal growth. We surface career opportunities to match the strengths and needs of our communities with those of our members. This is all done with an explicit commitment to anti-racism and transformational praxis (Esmonde & Booker, 2017; Freire, 1993), aiming to critically reflect on our own work and hold each other accountable to our relationships that span across universities, faith-based and cultural institutions, and other community-based organizations. In this way, our research endeavors do not take precedence over our communities; rather, it is through our communities that our research takes on shape and meaning.

The network's inception can be traced back to 2019, when the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice led a conference to address the need for building inter-institutional capacity around justice-centered partnership work. In particular, it became clear that United States graduate programs in education too often provide negligible support, courses, and structures for emerging scholars who are interested in collaborative research. Building off of the energy of this conference, a group of graduate students from several different institutions emerged and began meeting regularly. The Visioning Committee, as it was dubbed, recruited new members and organized the network that would come to be called RESHAPE, the Rising Education Scholars Helping Advance Partnerships and Equity. Since the network was formed, RESHAPE has organized a variety of activities, including workshops and symposia, a virtual co-working space, special interest groups, consulting services, and a virtual conference. After responding to an open call from RESHAPE, we, the authors of this introduction and the organizers of the RESHAPE conference, began meeting to organize the conference in summer 2020.

RESHAPE Conference: Vision and Goals

In keeping with RESHAPE's larger goals of cultivating community while advancing equity and justice in education, we realized the need to develop a network of early career scholars committed to advancing equity and justice through research and community partnership. We envisioned the conference as a central piece of our endeavor to build a new kind of research community. The purpose of the conference was to offer a set of experiences and opportunities for early career scholars: (1) to cultivate meaningful relationships with one another; (2) to learn from one another; and (3) to help one another understand how to achieve balance while conducting just and equitable research work with diverse groups of stakeholders. We intended to provide a space for early career scholars to share the experiences, skills, and expertise they have developed through the course of their professional and lived experiences among peers for the growth of each other, and the field as a whole.

With this conference, we emphasized avenues for networking and opportunities to build meaningful, lasting relationships and partnerships. Intended outcomes included: that attendees would forge cross-institutional relationships and collaborations in order to engage more deeply in research-practice partnership work; to advance the ability of participants to lead, and be a part of, partnership work; and to expand conference participants' networks, enhancing opportunities to build careers in the growing field of collaborative research in education. Thus, to convey these values and objectives, we framed the conference theme as "Cultivating Community & Reshaping the Future of Education Research."

Intentional Design: Selecting the Conference Platform and Activities

The conference was designed to be held virtually to allow for maximum accessibility for interested participants, as well as for considerations of public safety. We selected the virtual conference platform gather.town to allow attendees opportunities for dynamic conversations and interactions. Within gather.town, attendees had virtual avatars that they could use to navigate around the conference rooms. They could see and hear others when their avatars came within proximity to each other, replicating the experience of being in a crowded conference hall. During large-group conversations, presenters could broadcast themselves to the entire room.

We decided to use gather.town because relationship-building and networking were central to the aims of the conference. Conference time was designed for participants to both

share their expertise and to draw upon the expertise of peers. This included structured opportunities to engage in small, intimate groups (or “pods”) with others who share similar interests throughout the conference, and breakout rooms with “private space” tables to encourage conversation. We held daily opportunities for more informal relationship building through activities like speed networking and slide karaoke, which allowed for a sense of fun and play across our virtual geographies. Further, we integrated a spectrum of presentations, panels, and mentorship opportunities to achieve the goals of the conference and our overall network.

Workshops, Half-Baked Idea Sessions, & Presentations

With scholars across the country coming from different positionalities, the workshops, half-baked idea sessions, and traditional presentations represented the diverse life experiences of those connected to the RESHAPE network. Workshop topics ranged from using social network analysis to uncover knowledge dynamics of research practice partnerships (Ma & MacGregor, 2021) to managing partnership projects as early career scholars (Oyewole & Altavilla, 2021), guiding participants through real world experience and collective skill building. During half-baked idea sessions, participants shared ideas that they had at any stage in its development. These sessions supported early career scholars to solicit and offer feedback among peers about ideas they have for working in partnership with communities, however far along an idea or project may be. The half-baked idea sessions not only granted scholars a new audience to practice presenting to, but also introduced them to future collaborations in a safe and welcoming environment. The traditional presentations gave attendees the opportunity to engage with work that has been completed or in its final stages. These sessions allowed participants to give feedback, and to share their own relevant insight and experiences.

Crucial to fostering a sense of community, the workshops, half-baked idea sessions, and presentations propelled participants to be vulnerable with one another, think through problems together, grow ideas, and share expertise. While the issue of power dynamics is ever present, we were intentional in our attempts to flatten hierarchies throughout these spaces: through the mixing of early to more senior scholars in rooms, the encouragement of works in progress, as well as through the moderators who helped to support norms of communication and facilitate respectful, generative discussion in each session. Across the conference, we hoped to create an atmosphere of camaraderie amongst scholars in our common experiences as graduate students and our similar interests and visions of more just community research.

Panels

Considering the complexity of collaborative research as equity-oriented, interpersonal, community-based, and team-driven, we coordinated three separate panels focused on Building Community, Ensuring Equity, and Leveraging the Power of Partnerships. All panels included a mix of senior and emerging scholars to allow attendees to learn from and dialogue with more established figures in the field as well as those navigating the beginning of their work. On the first day of the conference, the Building Community panel invited four scholars to converse on how we can learn from each other and from the communities we work with. Panelists not only discussed building relationships within partnerships and how community drives the research work, but also reflected on processes of coming together as a larger research collective across institutions in order to advance collaborative approaches. Strategies and methods for forming multiple levels of community within partnerships, between partnerships, and across contexts were discussed. On the second day, the Ensuring Equity panel held space for dialogue on how to

advance racial and social justice within and through RPPs. Panelists spoke on dismantling inequitable power dynamics, methods of accountability for equity, justice, and inclusion, practices for amplifying the voices of communities, and navigational strategies for entering contexts or partnerships against this work. Panelists provided a tool kit of approaches in advancing efforts towards equity in the relationships, roles, and outcomes of RPPs. On the last day, the Leveraging the Power of Partnerships panel was designed as a conversation between late and early career scholars on how to accomplish this work at different points in one's academic or professional journey. This dialogue was open to the challenges that scholars and practitioners face, and integrated the lived experiences of graduate students, practitioners, and tenure faculty in overcoming and/or addressing them. The panel lent their advice and guidance in doing and forging partnership work despite personal, contextual, and financial constraints.

Overall, each of these conference panels created space to address multiple and complex topics, issues, and methods related to building a career as a scholar engaged in meaningful partnership research and conducting this work to be accountable to outcomes of equity and justice.

Mentorship

We further designed a mentorship strand throughout the conference, where early career scholars worked in small groups throughout the week on a shared project under the guidance of a mentor. After discussion within the design team, we decided to center collaborative writing as a focus for mentoring. One of the organizers (Buell) had previous experience working with the journal *The Assembly* and reached out to the editors to discuss a topic for a special issue. After negotiating the topic, the conference organizers designed three days of workshops that included both facilitated discussions and collaborative writing time. These workshops were crafted so that groups would ultimately be able to create and submit a proposal to this special issue.

Working with more senior graduate students and postdocs can afford a kind of cascading mentorship model that significantly impacts the skill development and overall trajectory of an early PhD student (Feldon et al., 2019). Mentors who signed up to lead groups at the RESHAPE conference cited their own graduate experiences being largely impacted by the positive relationships formed with such scholars and noted that much of their core research skills came through talking with and learning alongside more senior students and postdocs. During the conference, the RESHAPE mentors' positions ranged among postdocs, PhD candidates, assistant professors, and research scientists, while most of the mentees included graduate students in the pre-candidacy stages of their programs and some who had recently graduated.

We designed the mentored writing workshops to be spaces where the more junior scholars could share their ideas, practice academic writing, and jointly navigate the process of turning in a journal article proposal from planning to submission and revision. Daily workshop structures were provided for trying out different writing styles, setting collaborative writing norms and practices, generating and negotiating ideas, deciding on authorship, and assigning paper responsibilities. The power of the writing workshops came from the mentor-mentee relationships formed. Mentors took the suggested structures from RESHAPE and infused their own research experience and expertise. In a short amount of time, mentors helped build an environment in which mentees could feel more comfortable talking about difficult topics and iterating their ideas with new people. Some mentors shared that their approach to mentoring stemmed from the skills and institutional norms they wish they would have known as an early

graduate student. A number of mentors and mentees expressed that this experience made them feel energized about academic writing.

In the end, not all groups created a proposal. But while the advertised objective of the workshops was to produce a proposal for this special issue, our greater intention was twofold: first, that the participants could form long-lasting relationships with their mentors and fellow mentees; second, that they would be able to discuss problematic practices and power dynamics including structural, institutional, and student or professional identity-related dynamics that are commonplace within an academic writing team, so that they would then gain the confidence and ability to advocate for themselves and their ideas outside of the RESHAPE conference. We wanted participants to leave the workshops feeling empowered and more prepared to take on academic writing, and to break cycles of harmful scholarship. Mentoring graduate students with intentionality leads to the thriving of future generations of scholars, who we hope will continue to pass on an ethos of resisting oppressive scholarship and centering care and equity in practice.

Moving Forward

The ideas and questions that arose during our three days together ignited a fire in many of us. With PhD students' likelihood to drop out increasing in their first two years of graduate studies (Bair & Haworth, 2004), being in academia during a pandemic has been a particularly difficult experience for early career scholars, with reports of poor mental health, academic stress, financial strain, and familial distress and responsibilities (Ogilvie et al., 2020). But what the RESHAPE experience has shown us is that change is needed - the work at our institutions cannot be siloed, nor can we be adversarial in our fields. Our work is strengthened together, through the relationships and knowledge built across institutions, with and for communities. We must prioritize and cultivate spaces in which anti-racist and anti-oppressive conversations can grow. We need to acknowledge the damage to lands and generations of communities caused by the academy and make collective efforts towards healing and repair with Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, and other historically marginalized groups. We should craft more regular opportunities for researchers and educators from all communities to come together for shared scholarly work, play, and dreaming. Intentionality and care must be taken in designing such experiences to respect and celebrate scholars' holistic selves and their responsibilities outside of the academy. More intra- and inter-organization mentorship relationships should be supported.

While the future of RESHAPE is still emerging, the spirit of the work accomplished through this experience continues in the network of scholars established and their drive for transformation and with education. The RESHAPE conference illuminated the urgency for cultivating community among scholars in which we can teach, learn, imagine, and act with one another and with our partnerships. It is our hope that this work lives on, and persists in the network and beyond, catalyzing efforts towards more just futures of community research and learning.

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RESHAPE Conference Organizer Bios
(in alphabetical order)

Kathleen Arada is a PhD student in Learning Sciences and Human Development at the University of Washington. Her research centers on critical making, in exploring creativity, relationality, and consequentiality with tools and materials. She is particularly interested in examining the ethical and sociopolitical dimensions of craft and technology with youth of color and their communities. Prior to coming to UW, she imagined and built with youth in an elementary school makerspace.

Jason Buell is a postdoc at the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. His research is on designing environments and tools to support teachers in engaging students in purposeful sensemaking. Jason is a former middle school and elementary school science teacher.

Dana Conlin is a PhD candidate in Education at the University of California, Irvine. Her research focuses on anti-racism professional developments, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and the development of racial justice dispositions and practices - at the individual, interpersonal, and organization levels. Before coming to Irvine, Dana partnered with a non-profit organization designated for refugee communities and worked with refugee mothers and children.

Ari Hock is PhD Candidate in Learning Sciences and Human Development at the University of Washington. He is interested in better understanding how creative collaborations can help stimulate recognition of relational responsibilities. Before moving to Washington state, Ari lived in Washington, D.C., where he worked on the digital marketing team of KABOOM!, the national nonprofit that works to end playspace inequity.

Emily Holm Tobin is a PhD candidate in Learning Sciences & Human Development at the University of Washington. Her research interests include informal learning environments and outdoor learning, and their connection to the everyday lives of young children and their families. Before graduate school Emily lived in the Bay Area, where she worked as the Education Program Manager at Lindsay Wildlife Experience.

Carlos Sandoval is an Improvement Specialist at WestEd. His research has focused on understanding the practice of continuous improvement in education, including the relation of those practices to equity. Before WestEd, Carlos received his Ph.D. from the School of Education at UC Irvine, where he led and studied an improvement network in the context of teacher preparation.