

2023-26

THE EDUCARE NETWORK'S RESEARCH AGENDA: ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY



THE EDUCARE NETWORK'S 2023-26 RESEARCH AGENDA:

ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY

Educare is a national network of early childhood champions, comprised of comprehensive early care and education (ECE) programs that believe opportunity in life should not be determined by the circumstances of one's birth. Starting with one school in Chicago in 2000, the Educare Network is now 25 schools strong, transforming the lives of thousands of young children nationwide. Together with urban, suburban, rural, and tribal communities across the country and the District of Columbia, the Educare Network's mission is to advance quality early learning through partnership and innovation around practice, policy, and research so every child can thrive, with a vision of ensuring every family has equitable access to quality ECE in their community, promoting positive outcomes for generations to come.

A research agenda is a plan that identifies gaps and opportunities – in the policies, systems, programs, and practices that affect young children, their families, and the staff who support them – and uses the need for evidence to guide collective inquiry. In 2021-22, the Network's Educare Research, Evaluation, and Data Strategy (EREDS) Work Group began to develop a research agenda to address evidence gaps, advance racial equity, and generate transformative learnings for the ECE field. **The goals of the Educare Research Agenda to advance racial equity are:**

- 1. To elevate innovative research questions, methodologies, and practices** with broad implications for practice, programs, policy, children, and families;
- 2. To guide continuous quality improvement** and provide both learning and celebratory opportunities; and
- 3. To impact the ECE field** by informing practitioners, policymakers, funders, researchers, and advocates about Educare's efforts and findings that show promise for improving access, program quality, and outcomes of children, families, and the ECE workforce.

AUDIENCES

The Educare Research Agenda is intended to guide research, evaluation, and data-related efforts within

and outside the Educare Network.

Our work of ensuring a future where every child can thrive is sustained by partnerships and shared by early childhood champions nationwide; therefore, audiences for this Research Agenda include local and national Educare leaders, staff, families, funders, boards, and evaluators, along with broader ECE providers, systems leaders, funders, researchers, advocates, and policymakers. Tailored summaries of the full agenda and dissemination strategies will be used to inform and engage these different audiences.



RESEARCH AGENDA DEVELOPMENT

The primary aim in developing this research agenda focused on racial equity was to collectively identify and coalesce around aligned priorities for our shared research endeavors to address knowledge gaps, challenges, and opportunities in the ECE field and adjacent sectors. To achieve this aim leaders, staff, families, evaluators, funders, and other partners in various roles from across our nation-wide Network were engaged in contributing to the direction, development, and content of this research agenda. The agenda development and engagement process included various opportunities for input and discussion. A range of approaches were utilized for empowering Network members and collaborators and garnering their perspectives including unpacking key terms and



definitions, polls, collaborative, online discussion boards, engagement sessions with discussion prompts, and reviewing and commenting on iterative drafts. We also engaged racial equity and ECE thought leaders that were external to the Network to gather comprehensive feedback on a draft of the agenda.

DEFINING RACIAL EQUITY

Educare defines racial equity^{1,2,3} as both an outcome and a process. As an outcome, we achieve racial equity when a person is no more or less likely to experience society's benefits or burdens because of the color of their skin. As a process, we apply racial equity when those most impacted by institutional and structural inequities are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the policies and practices that impact their lives. Achieving racial equity requires valuing all individuals and populations equally and recognizing and rectifying historical injustices.

Racial equity involves working to address root causes of inequities, not just their manifestation, and holds society to a higher standard, demanding that we pay attention not just to individual-level discrimination but to overall social outcomes.



WHY FOCUS ON RACIAL EQUITY?

To truly eliminate the opportunity gap – the inequitable distribution of access and resources – programs like Educare must focus on the strengths, assets, and cultural wealth of racially marginalized communities, acknowledge systemic racism, and mitigate its effects in the lives of children, families, and ECE professionals. In doing so, Educare and other systems and program leaders will be able to provide more equitable ECE experiences and comprehensively support families and the early childhood workforce.

Across all economic backgrounds, children and families from communities that have been marginalized and experienced historical and ongoing disinvestment, along with the ECE staff who support them, face multiple levels of discrimination and system inequities in American society. The forces of systemic and institutional racism and oppression continue to lead to diminished opportunities for healthy and productive lives. Furthermore, deficit-based narratives and research methodologies — those that tend to focus solely on what needs to be changed and the outcomes of individuals and families — do not acknowledge the assets of individuals, families, and communities nor the role these systemic forces play in maintaining the status quo privileging those in power; namely White individuals in the United States.

WHY EDUCARE?

As a racially, ethnically, geographically, and linguistically diverse Network of schools and partners and a leader in the ECE field, **Educare is driven to interrogate policies and systems for positive change and greater equity** in access and opportunities. The Network has an existing research and data infrastructure that is comprised of local, placed-based research-practice partnerships (RPPs) ^{4,5} a [national evaluator](#), a [backbone coordinating team](#), and common data collection mechanisms and measures that will enable the advancement of this research agenda. The Network is well-positioned to ask and answer questions about the experiences of children, families, and ECE staff of color — including Black, Hispanic/Latine, Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and others who have been marginalized (e.g., immigrants, refugees) — in ways that center their voices, amplify their strengths, and lead to actionable information for evidence-based policy, systems, and practice change. Such research can help Educare and the ECE field better address racial equity and realize our vision of a world where every child and family can thrive, not merely survive.

EDUCARE'S GUIDING PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES OF ANTI-RACIST RESEARCH

Beyond research and evaluation questions focused on racial equity, Educare acknowledges that we must **engage in an approach to research that is culturally meaningful and embeds anti-racism through every phase of scientific inquiry** from conceptualization and implementation to interpretation and dissemination of findings. Previously, most early childhood research has primarily focused on poverty and “controlled” for race and ethnicity, leading to a color-blind approach that has maintained systemic inequities. In addition, much past research has used methods, analytic techniques, and interpretations that focused on individuals and their deficits. Moving forward, application and adherence to the principles and practices outlined below will **shift research and knowledge generation from a “business-as-usual” approach to one that centers anti-racism and puts equity at the forefront.**

The Network has made strides toward applying these principles and practices. For example, Educare has invested in professional learning for staff locally and nationally, including through the Local Evaluation Partner/National Evaluation Partner Community of Practice, efforts of the Educare Practice Advisory Work Group (EPACWG), and Red Nose Day grants focused on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) work within Educare schools. In addition, an internal Network committee called CARES (Committee for the Assessment of Racism, Equity, and Socialization), comprised of program staff and evaluators, was formed in 2021 to **infuse issues of equity into existing research infrastructure and ongoing data collection.** CARES has recommended the use of measures related to DEIB and developed internal reports and opportunities to support Network members’ use of data for learning and improvement. These efforts are designed to drive and support a shift in research, evaluation, and data strategies from traditional approaches to approaches that center anti-racism.



Our ongoing commitment to anti-racism will be further enacted through implementation of this research agenda, including the following principles:^{6,7,8}

- 1. Position and engage researchers and ECE professionals of color** to lead and actively facilitate in research efforts. This means examining the demographic make-up of evaluation and research teams and bringing racially marginalized members to teams to be more representative of Educare children, families and the communities in which schools are situated, especially at the leadership levels.
- 2. Read and cite theory and research** from Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latino/a/e, and other **scholars of color**.
- 3. Consider power dynamics and the white supremacy culture of funding, research processes, and ways of knowing** (e.g., how values, perspectives, norms, and practices such as perfectionism, objectivity, a sense of urgency, etc. operate to sustain power and privilege for those in the dominant culture).
- 4. Move away from a deficit-lens that casts blame on individuals rather than interrogating systemic inequities** that create the conditions (e.g., structural or institutional issues) for fewer opportunities and less access. **Seek to understand how local, state, national, and internal program policies and systems might function as contributors to disparities** and focus on how to make improvements.
- 5. See children and families of color in a holistic way and leverage a strengths-based approach.** Every individual, family, and community has their own set of assets and strengths that should be intentionally considered in all aspects of research design and execution. A strengths-based approach celebrates the racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of young children, their families and communities, and the workforce.
- 6. Ensure research priorities, questions, design, and processes reflect lived experiences** and engage the children, families, and/or practitioners who are the focus of both quantitative and qualitative research.
- 7. Actively and meaningfully involve community** in the identification and prioritization of research questions, selection of research methods and design, adoption or development of measures and indicators, and interpretation, use, and dissemination of findings.
- 8. Examine whether the measures and assessments used in research or the data collected are culturally relevant and meaningful to the communities that are part of the research.** Not all measures are an equally good fit in all contexts or with all groups of people. Address race, and more importantly, racism when considering what to measure and how to measure it.
- 9. When conducting quantitative statistical analyses, examine group differences in context** (e.g., use interactions, run separate models for each group) to explore whether patterns of results are the same for all groups. If differences are identified, continue the investigation to unpack the mechanisms accounting for the differences.
- 10. Understand, acknowledge, and address individuals' positionality and bias in designing, conducting, interpreting, and disseminating research.** Examine influence and biases of funders and Network member and partner organizations in the activities and processes of research to push for a stronger equity lens in their role.
- 11. Leverage channels and mechanisms for communicating and disseminating research findings in ways that are accessible** and readily reach those individuals, programs, and communities that are the focus of the research.

SAMPLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Educare is well situated to ask and answer both practice- and policy-focused research questions and apply strengths-based approaches to better understand and engage children and families and supporting ECE leaders and staff — especially those from racially marginalized groups. Based on knowledge of opportunities and needs in the ECE field and guided by principles of anti-racism, the Network identified sample research questions and organized them into four categories of focus: Policies & Systems, Programs & Professionals, Communities, Families & Children, and Measurement & Data.

POLICIES & SYSTEMS:

- ▶ What **policies and systems elements** (e.g., child care subsidies, housing, nutrition, safety net programs, immigration, taxes and funding formulas, etc.) and **characteristics** (e.g., governance structure, leadership characteristics, family leadership and engagement, data infrastructure) act as facilitators or barriers to early childhood programs **effectively providing programming to and partnering with racially marginalized families with young children?** What ripple effects are observed in response to these policies and systems?
- ▶ What policy-level conditions and strategies are most conducive to **creating a pipeline, recruiting, hiring, compensating, retaining, and providing ongoing supports to a diverse early childhood workforce** (e.g., racially, ethnically, linguistically, sex) including those in leadership and support roles or those working directly with children and families?

Sample research questions are organized into four categories of focus:

- ▶ Policies & Systems
- ▶ Programs & Professionals
- ▶ Communities, Families & Children
- ▶ Measurement & Data

PROGRAMS & PROFESSIONALS:

- ▶ Who are the children and families enrolled in Educare schools? What are the characteristics of children and families not enrolling in Educare (of those eligible and likely to access the program)? **What are the community conditions, staff characteristics, and program practices that may be contributing to greater equity in who enrolls and stays enrolled** in Educare?
- ▶ What are the **experiences of racism among the early childhood workforce** (leaders and staff) in ECE settings? How do these vary by race, ethnicity, local context, and their intersections (e.g., Afro-Latine, Black in Majority Black schools)? What are the **associations between experiences of racism and stress and mental health outcomes for staff?** What supports are most helpful to staff in navigating and addressing these experiences?
- ▶ What are the **beliefs and practices of ECE leaders and staff** around racial socialization of children? How do these vary by race, ethnicity, local context, and their intersections?
- ▶ **What approaches are leaders and staff taking to advance their anti-bias, anti-racism work** with children, families, and practitioners? What opportunities and challenges are they encountering?
- ▶ How do leaders, teachers, and family engagement staff **connect issues of race, systemic racism, and DEIB to their practices** (e.g., leadership, supervision, coaching, curriculum, assessment, pedagogical, and family engagement?) What professional learning, organizational, and community supports are in place and most effective? What other supports might be helpful?



- ▶ What **culturally relevant and meaningful practices** do ECE leaders and staff use to effectively partner with **and center the voices of families and community members** to build shared governance, community linkages – and school-community relationships for ECE programs within racially marginalized communities? How and why do these practices vary within and across programs and communities?
- ▶ What **sociocultural-focused curricula and instructional practices or approaches** are currently used to **support racially marginalized children, families, and staff** in ECE settings? To what extent are the curriculum and instructional practices or approaches anti-biased, anti-racist and culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive? What other practices or approaches might be adopted, developed, improved, or tested?
- ▶ How do **high quality ECE program practices** (e.g., leadership and organizational conditions, classroom instruction and interactions, home-school partnerships and family engagement) **vary depending on the racial, sociocultural, or linguistic characteristics of the children and families enrolled** in the program or the communities in which they are situated?

COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES & CHILDREN:

- ▶ What are the **experiences of racism among children and families in ECE settings**? How do these vary by race, ethnicity, local context, and their intersections (e.g., Afro-Latine, Black in Majority Black schools)? What are **associations between experiences of racism and stress and mental health outcomes for families**? What supports are most helpful to families in navigating and addressing these experiences?
- ▶ What are the **beliefs and practices of families in ECE settings around racial socialization of children**? How do these vary by race, ethnicity, local context, and their intersections?
- ▶ How and **to what extent** are these **strengths, assets, and cultural wealth of racially marginalized individuals, families, and communities being identified, leveraged, and effectively built upon** by early childhood program leaders and staff to support programming and outcomes?

MEASUREMENT & DATA

- ▶ **How valid, reliable, and culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive are the current research, evaluation, and data strategy tools and measures** being used for the populations of children, families, and staff represented by Educare schools? What new or updated measures might be better suited for capturing the knowledge, skills, behaviors or practices, mindsets, and experiences of racially marginalized young children, their families, and ECE professionals?
- ▶ What **sociocultural-focused assessment and data utilization practices or approaches** are currently used to support racially marginalized children, families, and staff in ECE settings? To what extent are the assessment and data utilization practices or approaches anti-biased, anti-racist and culturally and linguistically relevant and responsive? What other practices or approaches might be adopted, developed, improved, or tested?
- ▶ **How do Educare research-practice partnerships serve as a mechanism to embed and apply principles and practices of anti-racism** in research, evaluation, and data utilization activities – including supporting the identification and implementation of more culturally and linguistically relevant measures?

**WE MUST ENGAGE IN AN APPROACH TO RESEARCH THAT
IS CULTURALLY MEANINGFUL AND EMBEDS ANTI-RACISM
THROUGH EVERY PHASE OF SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY.**



OUTCOMES AND MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Guided by the aforementioned anti-racist principles and practices, the Educare Research Agenda will be considered to be successful if the following are observed and documented:

STUDY IMPLEMENTATION AND COMPLETION

- ▶ Multiple studies or analyses addressing the research questions outlined above or others **identified in partnership with Network members are completed.**
- ▶ The **voices and expertise of Black, Latine, and Indigenous scholars, workforce, families, and children are centered in research** design and implementation.
- ▶ **Network researchers and fundraising teams have been able to secure external funding for studies focused on racial equity** that leverage [Educare National Evaluation](#) data in addition to other primary data collection.
- ▶ **More scholars of color** or representing marginalized (rather than dominant) cultures **lead or co-lead research and evaluation** in the Network.
- ▶ New **data or measures focused on racial equity are gathered, accessed, and analyzed** by Network researchers in support of their program partners.

DISSEMINATION AND REACH

- ▶ **Dissemination plans are developed and implemented that identify the most effective formats or strategies** for sharing research findings and practice/policy implications in **accessible ways with multiple audiences**, including the individuals, programs, and communities that are the focus of the research.
- ▶ Dissemination plans and activities **center the voices and engage members of the community** in those efforts when possible.
- ▶ Study findings and **implications have been widely disseminated** within the Network and to the broader ECE field.
- ▶ **Studies are cited and accessed by others in the practice, research, and policy arenas;** citations and reach are tracked annually with the expectation of increased circulation.





USE AND INFLUENCE

- ▶ Educare data and research findings focusing on racial equity are **shared and leveraged at multiple levels in meaningful ways that result in greater racial equity and improvement outcomes or impact:**
 - **At the local RPP level** – Local evaluation partners and school leaders partner to engage staff, families, and/or community partners in regular data dialogues to identify strengths and challenges, inform decisions, guide continuous quality improvement in practices, and use data as a springboard to more open discussions, reflection, and changes.
 - **At the Network level** – Network researchers and leadership engage Network members and partners in the co-interpretation of cross-site data and the identifications of ideas and opportunities for systems-wide procedural or programmatic changes or needed Network-wide supports or resources that are responsive to study findings and value diversity and enhance equity, inclusion, and belonging within our schools and organizations.
 - **At the National level** – share the story of how a Network of comprehensive ECE programs assesses and advances diversity, equity and inclusion; addresses issues of systemic racism or injustice; and innovates and improves in practice and policy work, potentially inspiring others to do the same in their own racial equity endeavors.
- ▶ ECE systems-level policymakers, program-level leaders, and staff within and beyond Educare are **interested in and able to use findings and data** to guide programming for children and families, professional learning, and continuous quality improvement.
- ▶ Educare board members and funders **appreciate the importance of and can speak to these data and findings and understand the value of RPPs and LEPs** in driving forward these efforts to generate new knowledge centering racial equity.

**WE ACHIEVE RACIAL EQUITY WHEN A PERSON IS NO MORE
OR LESS LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE SOCIETY'S BENEFITS OR
BURDENS BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN.**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The development of this research agenda was led by members of the Educare Research, Evaluation, and Data Strategy (EREDS) Work Group, including:

EREDS Leadership

- ▶ **Cindy Decker** (EREDS co-chair) - Executive Director, Tulsa Educare
- ▶ **Noreen Yazejian** (EREDS co-chair and National Evaluation Partner) - Senior Research Scientist, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- ▶ **Gary Bingham** (current EREDS liaison to the Educare Governance Council and LEP) - Professor, Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education and Director of the Urban Child Study Center, Georgia State University
- ▶ **Amanda Stein** (Network backbone lead and LEP) - Managing Director, Research & Evaluation, Start Early

EREDS Members

- ▶ **Brenda Jones-Harden** (former LEP) - Professor of Child and Family Welfare, Columbia School of Social Work
- ▶ **Cynthia Jackson** (current) - Executive Director, Educare Learning Network
- ▶ **Diane Horm** (current LEP) - George Kaiser Family Foundation Endowed Chair of Early Childhood Education and Founding Director of the Early Childhood Education Institute (ECEI), University of Oklahoma at Tulsa
- ▶ **Donna Bryant** (current National Evaluation Partner) - Senior Research Scientist, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- ▶ **Gisele Crawford** (staff) - Social Research Specialist, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- ▶ **Gladys Haynes** (current) - Director, Nebraska Early Learning Initiatives, Buffett Early Childhood Fund
- ▶ **Iheoma Iruka** (current and National Evaluation Partner) - Research Professor, Department of Public Policy and Founding Director, Equity Research Action Coalition, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- ▶ **Jamal Berry** (current) - President and Chief Executive Officer, Educare DC
- ▶ **Kalen Donahue** (staff National Evaluation Partner) - Research Assistant, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- ▶ **Keith Liederman** (former) - Chief Executive Officer, Clover
- ▶ **Karla Bohl** (current) - School Director, Educare Lincoln
- ▶ **Mindy Zapata** (former) - Director, Early Head Start and Head Start, Southwest Human Development
- ▶ **Sue Rasher** (current LEP) - Director, OER Associates LLC
- ▶ **Tiffany King** (current LEP) - Senior Research Analyst, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University

A special thanks goes to all Network members including school leaders and staff, researchers and evaluators, families, and other partners at Educare schools that contributed their perspective and ideas to the development of this research agenda. Furthermore, we gratefully acknowledge a set of external thought leaders, researchers, funders, and experts in the field of early childhood and equity who generously agreed to review a draft of the research agenda and provide substantive feedback.

REFERENCES

1. National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). Introduction to health equity and social determinants of health. In National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (Ed.), *Achieving behavioral health equity for children, families, and communities: Proceedings of a workshop*. National Academies Press. <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/25347/achieving-behavioral-health-equity-for-children-families-and-communities-proceedings>
2. Race Forward. (n.d.) What is racial equity? Race Forward. <https://www.raceforward.org/about/what-is-racial-equity>
3. Racial Equity Tools. (2020). Racial equity tools glossary: Racial equity. Racial Equity Tools. <https://www.raciaequitytools.org/glossary>
4. Soliday Hong, S.L., Yazejian, N., Guss, S., Stein, A.G., Connors, M., Horm, D., Kainz, K., & the Educare Learning Network Investigative Team. (2019). Broadening the definition of collaboration in early care and education. *Continuous improvement: Research collaborations to improve early care and education quality*. *Early Education and Development*, 30(8), 1084-1093. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2019.1656987>
5. Connors, M.C., Pacchiano, D., Stein, A.G., & Swartz, M. (2021). Building Capacity for Research and Practice: A Partnership Approach. *Future of Children*, 31(1), 119-135. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1318701.pdf>
6. Andrews, K., Parekh, J., & Peckoo, S. (2019). A guide to incorporating a racial and ethnic equity perspective throughout the research process. *Child Trends*. https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/RacialEthnicEquityPerspective_ChildTrends_October2019.pdf
7. Bruno, E.P. & Iruka, I. U. (2022). Reexamining the Carolina Abecedarian Project using an antiracist perspective: Implications for early care and education research. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 58, 165-176. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.09.001>
8. Researchers Investigating Sociocultural Equity and Race (RISER) Network. (2021, May 11). Advancing equity: Conducting strength-based research in early care and education. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzOi-bPg5Fs>