“INFUSING CULTURE AND EQUITY AT EVERY LEVEL OF INTERACTION”

IMPACTS OF EQUITABLE RESEARCH METHODS PROGRAMMING IN THE EDUCARE NETWORK

October 27, 2026

Allison De Marco, Laura Kuhn, & Kalen Donahue
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute



The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

EDUCARE®

INTRODUCTION

Racially equitable research methods, which center the voices of those closest to the issue under study, have the potential to create more just and actionable research findings. For the past 6 years (September 2020 to September 2026), research teams with the Educare National Network have been working to incorporate such practices into their research with children, families, ECE staff, and the wider community in the 25-site network. Over the last few years, the National Evaluation Partner (NEP) at UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) has been evaluating the progress of this work. We have reflected on accountability in the past through the use of surveys and other activities completed with Local Evaluation Partner (LEP) teams at each site to evaluate the adoption of anti-racist research practices. This report shares results from two of those efforts.[1]

In the spring of 2024, the FPG team sent a survey to all network members to learn about progress in key areas, as laid out in the principles of the guiding document *Educare Network's Research Agenda: Advancing Racial Equity (see Figure 1)*. Key areas included recruitment and retention efforts to create a more diverse evaluation staff, engagement of community in research development and meaning-making, citing scholarship by scholars of color, disaggregating data by race/ethnicity, staff participation in racial equity training, and equitable methods of data dissemination (learn more about these dissemination methods here: De Marco et al., 2026).



[1] There has been turnover at many LEP sites, so the same researchers didn't participate in programming and evaluation activities across the six years.

Figure 1. Eleven Principles from the Educare Network's 2023-2026 Research Agenda: Advancing Racial Equity

Our ongoing commitment to anti-racism will be further enacted through implementation of this research agenda, including the following principles:

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 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 analysis, 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 and finding ways that are accessible** and readily reach those individuals, programs, and communities that are the focus of the research.

In June 2026, 31 of the Educare LEP Community of Practice (CoP) members came together in the monthly meeting to reflect on the impacts of the 6-year-long efforts to infuse more equitable research practices into the network. These efforts included programming on accountability, identity mapping, measurement of race, positionality statements, trauma-informed study design, equitable data visualization, inclusive language use, and participatory dissemination methods. Programming was interactive and multi-modal, for example we presented a tool for assessing level of community engagement (REACH Tool) and then broke into site-based small groups to complete the web-based assessment; in small groups we fleshed out the logic model to guide the work; we participated in large-scale trainings like the Racial Equity Institute's Groundwater Workshop and debriefed as a group (learn more about the programming here: De Marco et al., 2024). To examine the impacts of these practices, the NEP at FPG adapted a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) process in which a circular map is drawn with concentric ripples indicating levels of impacts and slices to indicate stages of the research process (Emery, Higgins, Chazdon, & Hansen, 2015).

RESULTS OF EQUITABLE PRACTICES SURVEY

In total, the Network had 22 LEP teams. Of those, 20 teams completed the survey. In response to *Research Agenda* principle 1 (*Position and engage researchers and ECE professionals of color to lead and actively facilitate in research efforts*) most members improved their recruitment practices to create a more racially inclusive staff (70%) and most of those (79%) reported that these efforts were successful (see table 1). This was also true for efforts to retain a diverse staff.

Table 1. Recruitment and Retention Efforts

	Yes	Successful?
Recruitment practices have been updated to seek more inclusive staff	14 (70%)	11/14 (79%)
Retention practices have been updated to retain diverse staff	13 (65%)	10/13 (77%)

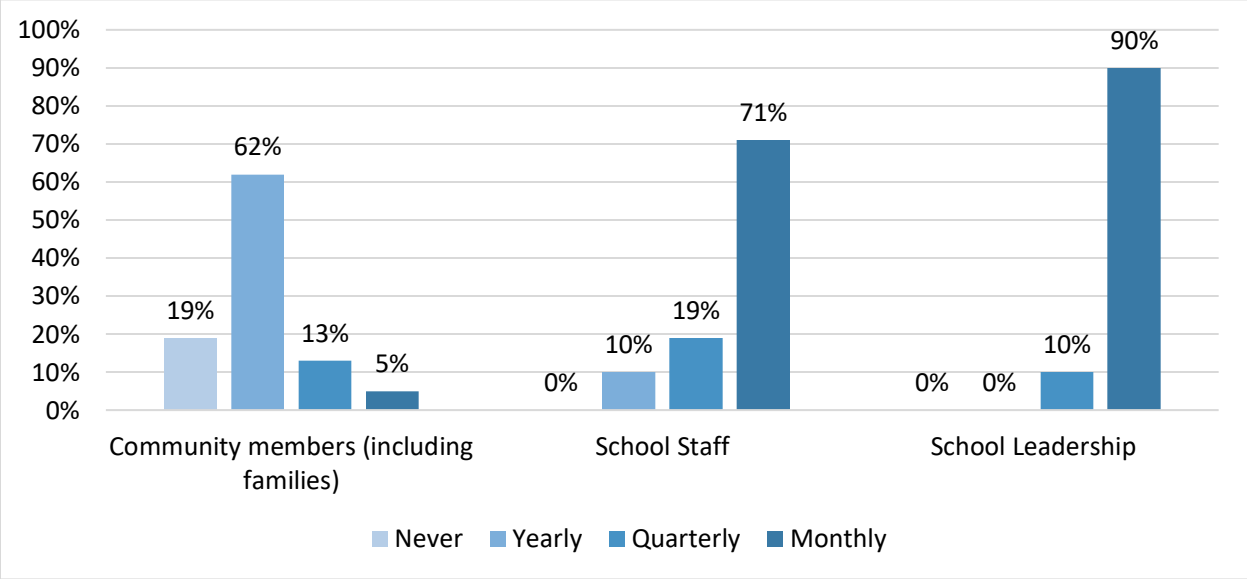
To understand how far into network teams the programming was reaching, respondents were asked if all members of their teams were invited to the CoP meetings and if their staff, including data collectors, were included in other racial equity programming that occurred outside of the CoP meeting time or was available asynchronously. This type of programming supports many of the principles, including principle 3 (*Consider power dynamics and the white supremacy culture of funding, research processes, and ways of knowing*) and principle 10 (*Understand, acknowledge, and address individuals' positionality and bias in designing, conducting, interpreting, and disseminating research*). Most participants responded affirmatively to each question (see table 2).

Table 2. Participation in the Community of Practice and Racial Equity Training

	Yes	No
All LEP staff participate in CoP (or are invited)	11 (52%)	10 (48%)
LEP staff including data collectors participate in racial equity training	17 (81%)	4 (19%)

As a Research-Practice Partnership model (RPP; Henrick et al., 2023) and as guided by the *Research Agenda*, engaging community members in this work is essential. This commitment to inclusion is reflected in principle 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*) and principle 7 (*Actively and meaningfully involve community*). Using a scale of never, monthly, quarterly, and yearly, respondents were asked how often they meet with school staff, which included teachers, directors, and family engagement specialists, school leadership, and community members (including families). Meetings with internal partners within the Educare schools typically happened monthly, while community members were largely engaged annually (figure 2).

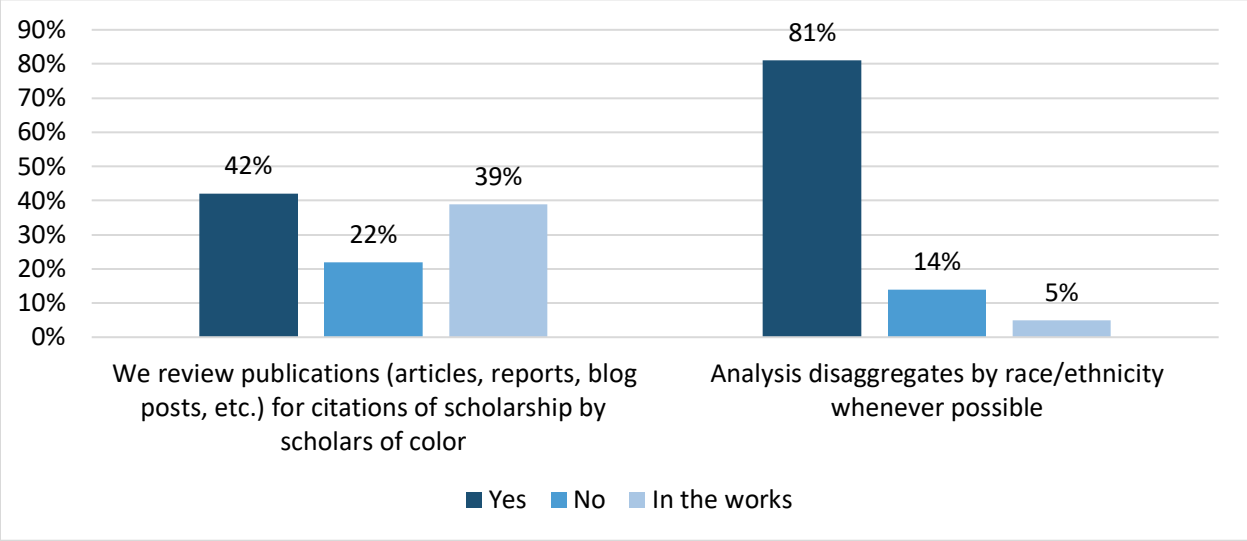
Figure 2. Frequency of Engagement with Staff, Leadership, and Community



Research Agenda principle 2 (*Read and cite theory and research from Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latino/a/e, and other scholars of color*) and principle 9 (*When conducting quantitative statistical analyses, examine group differences in context … to explore whether patterns of results are the same for all groups*) guided the next set of survey questions on review of publications and disaggregation of data (figure 3). Members responded to these two questions

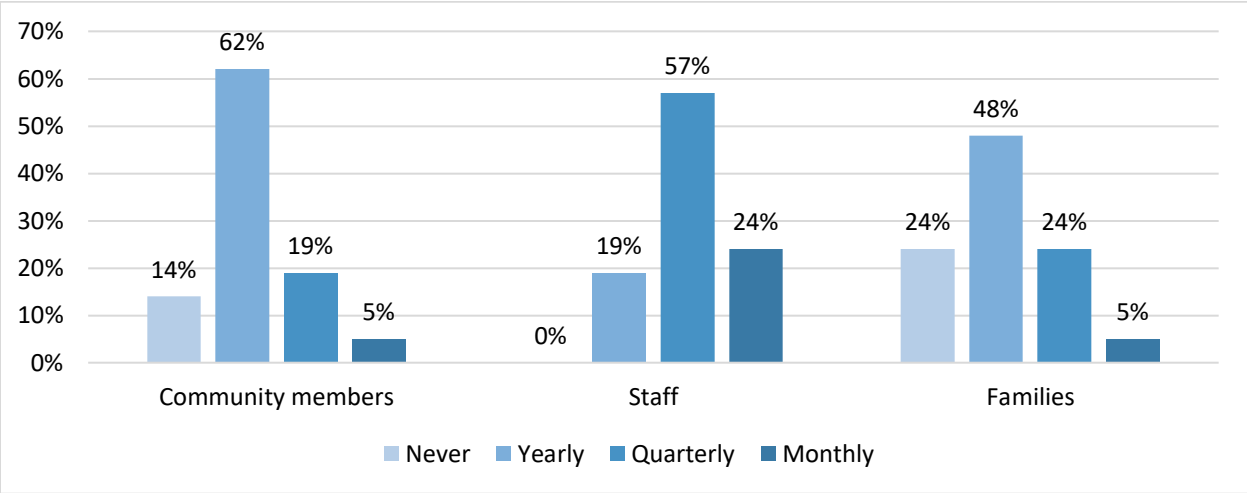
with either “Yes,” “No,” or “In the Works.” Over 80% reported that these two practices were either currently happening (“Yes”) or in process (“In the Works”).

Figure 3. Implementation of Equitable Practices



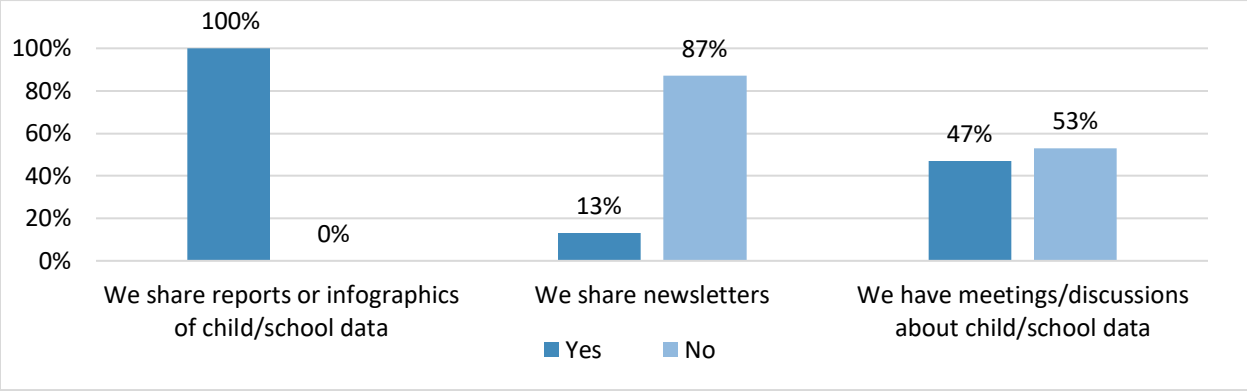
Principle 7 calls on network research members to “*actively and meaningfully involve community*,” including in the dissemination of data. Figure 4 reflects how often data is shared with staff, families, and other community members, with most sharing at least yearly.

Figure 4. Frequency of Disseminating Data with Key Partners



Researchers shared data with staff and community members in a variety of ways including in reports or infographics (100%) and through meetings and discussions about child-level and school-level data (47%), as shown in figure 5. Few participants were including findings in newsletters (13%).

Figure 5. Methods of Data Sharing

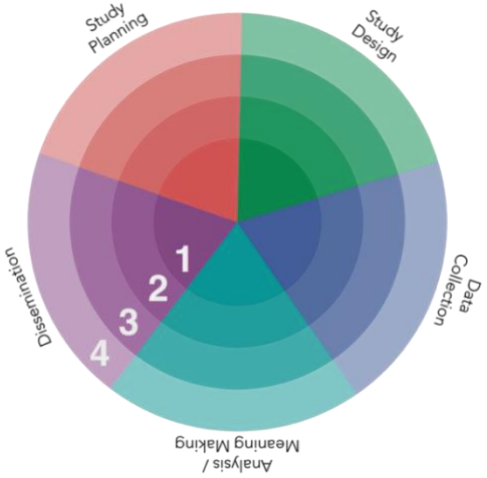


To address principal 11, we asked about how teams were sharing data with their partners. Respondents indicated overwhelmingly that they did share specific communication about the children in their program (100% shared reports on child assessments) and general information about the research (87% share newsletters) in easy to access formats, but less frequently did LEPs provide time for community discussions and sense making (53% had meetings).

RESULTS OF RIPPLE EFFECTS MAPPING

Building on the earlier survey, the REM activity invited LEP members to reflect on the previous racial equity methods programming, the *Research Agenda* content, and the work to implement the practices in our work. In the REM process, a map resembling a bullseye is divided into 1) ripples moving out from the center, indicating levels of impacts: self, team, organization, and community/policy; and 2) wedges to indicate stages of the research process (figure 6; Emery et al., 2015).

Figure 6. Blank REM depicting research phases with the ripples where numbers 1-4 represent self, team, organization, and community/policy, respectively



The stages represented study planning, study design, data collection, analysis/meaning making, and dissemination. The REM process is akin to a focus group in which a community process is used to brainstorm impacts. Participants were first provided a refresher of the programming. We were then invited to spend a few minutes reflecting or journaling on these prompts:

- Where have you seen impacts in each ripple?
- What unexpected things have happened as a result of your involvement in these efforts?

We then moved into small groups to brainstorm concrete examples to add to the map image in Canva via Zoom (see figure 8). Following this collaboration, we reconvened and shared our key takeaways, which impacts were particularly important, meaningful, or impactful. Finally, each member was invited to share a next step for their team. Illustrative impacts are shared verbatim in the four tables below.

Highlights of the programing received over the past 6 years included (see full topic inventory):

- September 2020: Started our programming with Racial Equity Goal-Setting activity
- Guest speakers: Dawn A. Yazzie, Navajo Nation; Paul Gorski, Equity Literacy Institute; Fabienne Doucet, Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools; Kristin Black, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health; Anjali Ferguson, Parenting Culture; Amber Sansbury-Scott, Institute for Research on Poverty
- Monthly reports on implementation activities from LEP teams
- Operationalizing and implementing principles from our *Research Agenda: Advancing Racial Equity*
- Creating a Logic Model
- Collecting and sharing results of data collection on progress
- Addressing practices for accountability, identity mapping, measurement of race, positionality statements, 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge & Processing
- Sharing Language Summit Learning – Why Inclusive Language Matters, How we Talk about Race/Ethnicity, Gender-Inclusive Language, Person-First and Identity-First language

Ripples

For the self ripple, dovetailing with what we learned in the earlier survey, the dissemination stage had the most impacts reported by LEP researchers (table 3; "*Making positionality statements part of publications.*"). This reflects implementation of *Research Agenda* principle 11 (*Leverage channels and mechanisms for communicating and disseminating research findings in ways that are accessible*).

Table 3. Illustrative impacts reported at the self ripple

Impact
Creation of the DLL [Dual Language Learner] workgroup
Making positionality statements part of publications.
Strengthened in my convictions through this group - shared values, example of others.
Racial equity framing to dosage paper [peer-reviewed article on the impacts of level of participation in Educare programming]
Awareness and intentionality regarding the role of positionality in all stages of research and evaluation.

For the team ripple, the most common impact was for study design (table 4; "*More intentionality in examining our sample - thinking about intersectionality and using appropriate terms. Including all groups in analyses*."). As reported above, there is evidence for this practice in the 2024 LEP survey - the majority reported disaggregating data by racial and ethnic groups.

Table 4. Illustrative impacts reported at the team ripple

Impact
Infusing culture and equity at every level of interaction
Local consideration of adoption of child assessment measure that may have broader linguistic and cultural application (IDELA)
More intentionality in examining our sample - thinking about intersectionality and using appropriate terms. Including all groups in analyses.
Train community members to collect data.

For the organization ripple, in the study planning phase participants reported the most impacts (table 5; "*Use the activities from the Educare Network RPP* [Research-Practice Partnership] *in other ways within the broader team at the university, at the site/school, and with other partners in community - while being mindful of identity as a white researcher doing research with primarily Black communities*.").

Table 5. Illustrative impacts reported at the organization ripple

Impact
Use the activities from the Educare Network RPP in other ways within the broader team at the university, at the site/school, and with other partners in community - while being mindful of identity as a white researcher doing research with primarily Black communities.
Increased planning for considering experiences and outcomes for DLLs
Beyond Educare, the tool that was introduced for detailing participatory research at various levels of study design, analysis, and interpretation was helpful [REACH Tool]
Added explicit Qs about experience of discrimination and inequity (deleted after 2024)
Increased Qualitative and mixed methods - to capture lived experience
Capacity building with staff around practices and assessments.
Creating reports in partnership with our site, user-friendly. Teachers are now excited about the data. Talking with families monthly.

Finally, for the community/policy ripple, dissemination, again, saw the most impacts (table 6; "*Sharing back data to teachers/classrooms to guide practices; elevating voices of the professionals we're working with*").

The organization level and the community/policy level were where the most impacts were identified, with 14 responses each. For example, at the organization level, one key impact was "*Beyond Educare, the tool that was introduced for detailing participatory research at various*

levels of study design, analysis, and interpretation was helpful [REACH Tool; Jacquez & Vaughn, 2025]." While, at the community/policy level, one noted impact was "*Have used the principles of our research agenda to advance equity to inform work broadly*." Though they were key to our work, the self ripple received the least mentions with just 9 impacts. For example, one respondent mentioned they "*Strengthened in my convictions through this group - shared values, example of others.*"

Table 6. Illustrative impacts reported at the community/policy ripple

Impact
Consult with other researchers on equitable study design.
Have used the principles of our research agenda to advance equity to inform work broadly.
Think of the different audiences from the beginning of the study. Including recruitment and hiring process
Supported my understanding and ability to help others with racial equity research.
Discussing utility of measures and whether they are capturing data we need in terms of as appropriate indicators for specific populations of children and families
Sharing back data to teachers/classrooms to guide practices; elevating voices of the professionals we're working with

Research Stages

Looking at the stages of the research process, the most impacts were reported at the study planning phase (13) and the dissemination phase (11). As an indicator of impacts at the dissemination phase, an Educare LEP team published an article in the *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* on our innovative work in this area using data walk methods to share findings. Sample impacts for each research stage are included in table 7.

Table 7. Sample of impacts by stage of research

Stage of Research	***Sample Impact from REM activity***
Study Planning (13)	• Creation of the DLL workgroup • Making positionality statements part of publications
Study Design (9)	• Creation of the DLL workgroup
Data Collection (7)	• Strengthened my convictions through this group – shared values, example of others
Data Analysis & Meaning-Making (5)	• Racial Equity framing to dosage paper
Dissemination (11)	• Making positionality statements part of publications • [Researcher]'s survival analysis • Did we bring conversations to programs?
Cross-cutting	• Awareness and intentionality regarding the role of positionality in all stages of research and evaluation

Themes

We used a qualitative content analysis approach to code the responses into key themes. This is a method used to both analyze and interpret the content of textual data in a systematic way to identify patterns and themes (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). The table below provides a summary of these themes (see table 8).

Table 8. Key themes of each research stage

Research stage	*Key themes*
Study planning	1. Creation of Dual-Language Learners (DLL) workgroup 2. Positionality/identity awareness 3. Infusion of culture and equity 4. Introduction of new measures 5. Additional perspectives included 6. Increased staff support
Study design	1. Better/new measures and tools 2. Implementation of the research agenda 3. Provision of technical assistance beyond the network 4. Intentional/intersectional analysis
Data collection	1. Stronger connections with community 2. Training of community to collect data 3. Improved equity-related questions 4. Methods to increase community voice
Data analysis and Meaning-making	1. Using equity framing 2. Extension of methods to other settings 3. Building staff capacity 4. Use of land acknowledgements
Dissemination	1. Publishing 2. Additional methods 3. Additional audiences 4. Elevating voices

Dissemination of research findings has been a big focus of efforts in this community of practice. One concrete example can be found in the use of data walks at several sites to share data back with families and staff in an innovative way. These data walks involved community members in planning, sharing of research findings, and sought community feedback in an accessible and inclusive way (figure 7).

Figure 7. Example of a Data Walk Image from Educare of Omaha

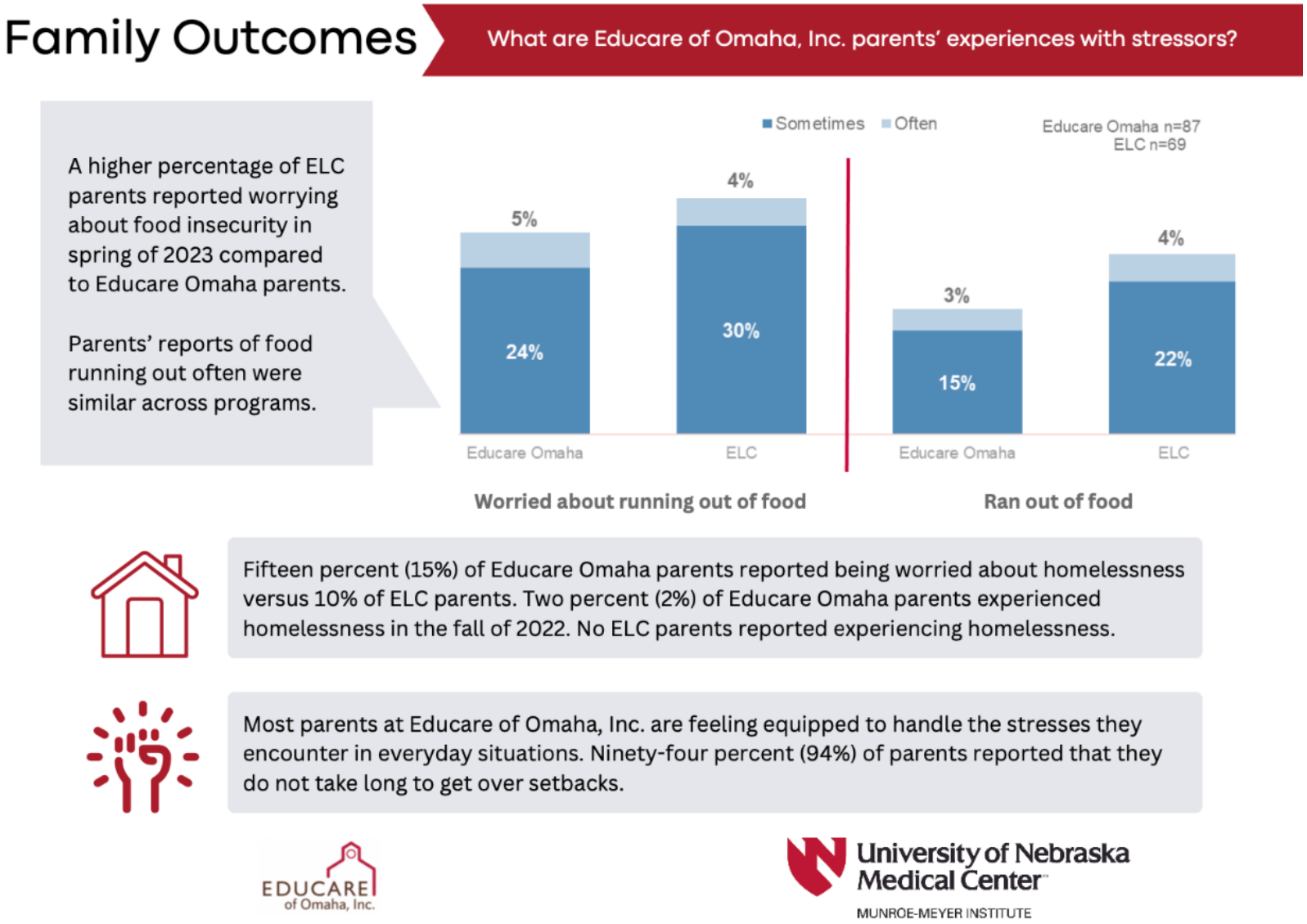
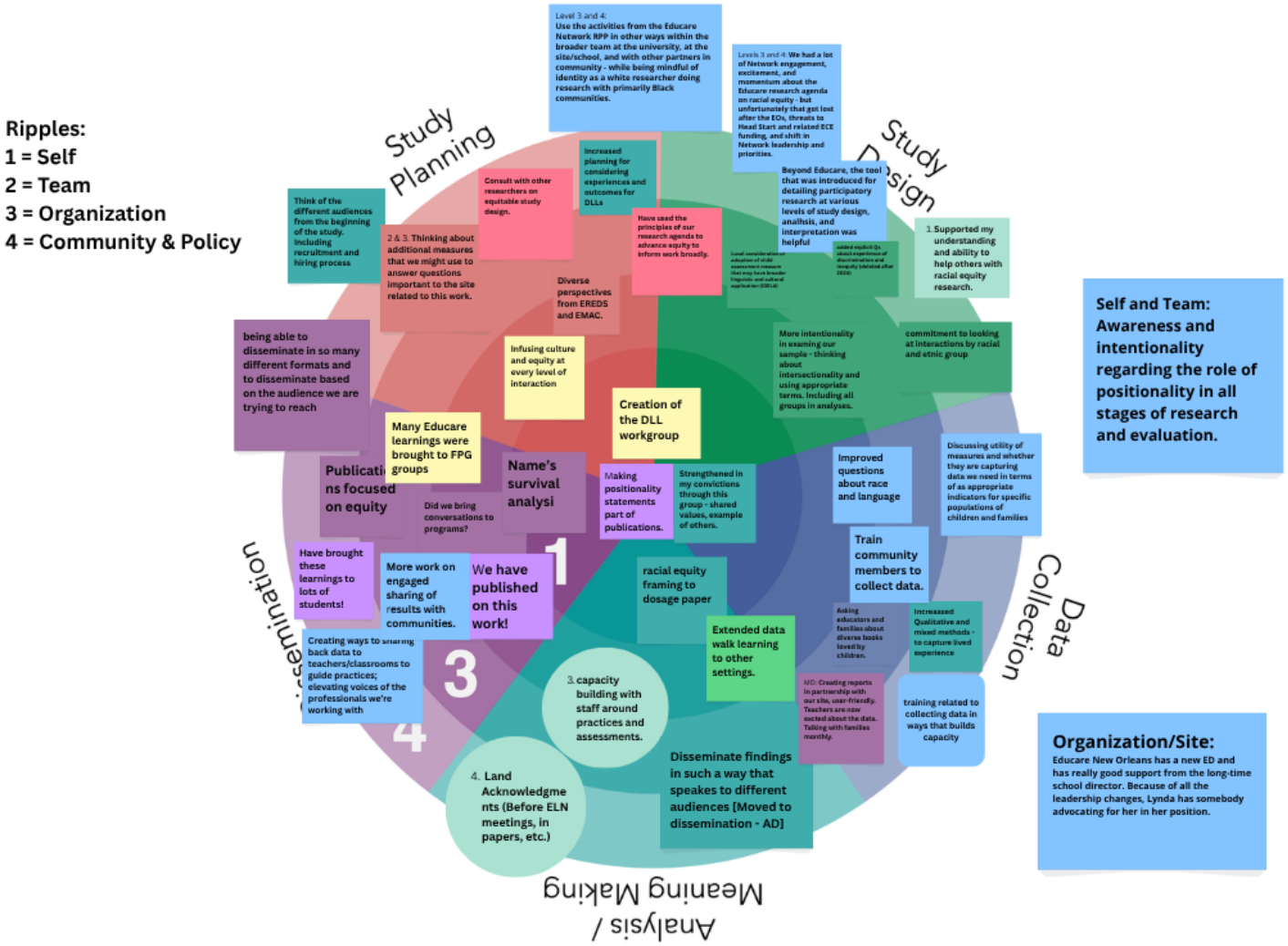


Figure 8. Completed REM with "stickies" adding impacts across ripples and study stages



DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This report details findings from an evaluation of a six-year-long community of practice working to infuse equitable and community-engaged research practices within a national network of early childhood researchers. This innovative work was grounded in a research agenda to advance racial equity in all phases of the research process. These findings provide strong evidence for increased commitment to community engaged scholarship that has resulted from this programming. We saw these findings reflected in both the Equitable Practices survey and the REM activity. Across the board, researchers at Educare sites reported sharing data with a wide range of community members that include school staff, teachers, family engagement specialists, directors, parents and other caregivers, and the broader community.

Reflecting on our efforts to infuse more equitable research practices across our network revealed that we've made progress on all 11 principles of our research agenda to advance racial equity. Demonstrations of these practices occurred at both internal and external levels. Internal to our teams and sites, staff recruitment and retention efforts were made to recruit, hire and retain more racially and ethnically inclusive research staff and leadership. Further, efforts were made to increase training on the topic of the benefits of a diverse and representative workforce both through the Network community of practice meetings and at individual sites. Externally, substantial new and increased existing efforts were made to engage with school communities and beyond into the neighborhoods and cities in which the programs are located to influence future policymaking. Research teams shared data in a variety of ways with all these constituencies, including using infographics, community meetings, open houses, and oral presentations. Teams also sought to gain additional perspectives through outreach in their communities for new ideas on implementation and program improvement.

Additionally, in the ripple effects process, we found that teams' equitable research practices moved beyond the Educare Network and its communities into a broader academic setting. Participants reported sharing information with colleagues in other departments and universities, consulting on these methods for other research projects, and teaching and mentoring students to take this approach in their own work.

We have also seen increased attention to positionality, identity, and power dynamics, as seen in the REM responses. Greater awareness of these aspects in the research process can lead to research that better reflects the experiences of the communities under study. Lastly, as the ripple metaphor suggests, we are seeing this work have impacts beyond our teams and networks. The work has expanded to other research teams and departments in our research centers and universities.

While it was also noted that the current federal administration's Executive Orders and other prohibitions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work has reduced funded efforts and slowed momentum, Network research members continue to build and implement equitable methods. Evidence of this commitment is supported by the recent publication of an article that utilizes our qualitative data on Educare teaching staff's experiences talking to young children about race and cultural heritage (Crawford et al., 2026).

REFERENCES

Crawford, G., De Marco, A., Wongwai, C., Iruka, I. U., Soliday Hong, S. L., Kuhn, L., & Price, Z. (2026). Early care and education professionals talk about talking about race with young children. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education, 32*(1), 1-28.

Delve, L., & Limpaecher, A. (2023, March 24). *The Practical Guide to Qualitative Content Analysis.* https://delvetool.com/blog/guide-qualitative-content-analysis

De Marco, A., Gabas, C., Baird, S., Buck, D., Johnson, J., & Napoli, A. (2026). Using Data Walks to Leverage Community Expertise: Examples in Research-Practice Partnerships. *Journal Of Participatory Research Methods, 7*(2). Special Issue on Equitable Dissemination. https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.161572

De Marco, A., Iruka, I., Ho, D., Yazejian, N., Price, Z., Kuhn, L. & the Educare Team (2024). Building Equitable Research and Evaluation Practices in the Educare Learning Network. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 30(2): 1-26. DOI: 10.18023/ijece.2024.30.2.001

Emery, M., Higgins, L., Chazdon, S., & Hansen, D. (2015). Using ripple effect mapping to evaluate program impact: Choosing or combining the methods that work best for you. *Journal of Extension*, *53*(2).

Henrick, E., Farrell, C.C., Singleton, C. Resnick, A.F., Penuel, W.R., Arce-Trigatti, P., Schmidt, D., Sexton, S., Stamatis, K., & Wellberg, S. (2023). Indicators of research practice partnership health and effectiveness: Updating the five dimensions framework. National Center for Research in Policy and Practice and National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships. doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/YVGCN

Jacquez, F., & Vaughn, L. (2025). The report of engagement in community research (REACH) tool: A strategy to promote transparency and improve planning in community-engaged research. *Journal of participatory research methods*, *6*(3), 140734.