EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH FOR
Educational Equity

Family–School–Systems Connections

Christine M. McWayne
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About the Editors

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Christine M. McWayne, Professor in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development at Tufts University, is an applied developmental psychologist and a community-based educational researcher whose work has centered on fostering better understandings of the early social and learning successes of young children growing up in urban poverty, as well as on understanding how to better support and connect the adult contributors to children's early development—their primary caregivers and teachers. Underpinning her research with these adults are attempts to flip the script, so to speak, and create the space for practitioners and family members supporting children's development to tell us what they know, what they do, and how they do it, so that their experiential knowledge can inform our scientific knowledge base. Dr. McWayne has served as Principal Investigator on several grants, including ones from the National Institutes of Health, the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Science Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the Brady Education Foundation. She has served as a consultant on numerous local, state, and federal working groups and expert convenings on topics such as dual language learners' school readiness, assessment, family engagement, parenting, and Head Start programming. Dr. McWayne has also served on the editorial boards of *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* and the *National Head Start Association's Dialog* and as Associate Editor for the *Educational Researcher*, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, and *Journal of School Psychology*. She received her Ph.D. in school, community and clinical-child psychology from the University of Pennsylvania.

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Vivian L. Gadsden is the William T. Carter Professor of Child Development, Professor of Education, and Faculty Co-Director of the Penn Early Childhood and Family Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also a professor of Africana Studies and of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. Her research, scholarly interests, and writing focus on learning and literacies across the life-course and address issues of equity, access, and change for young children and families in historically marginalized communities. Her conceptual framework, family cultures, has been used widely to examine the interconnectedness among families' political, cultural, and social histories and racialized identities; social practices; and literacy processes. Her collaborative research projects draw upon interdisciplinary frameworks that examine early childhood development, parenting, and families; father engagement in urban settings; social factors affecting health and education; children of incarcerated parents; and intergenerational learning within African American and Latine families. Dr. Gadsden serves and has served on numerous foundation boards and review committees, including the Buffett Institute, the Foundation for Child Development, and the Spencer Foundation; Congressionally mandated review committees; and White House initiatives. She chaired The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's Committee on Supporting Parents of Young Children, serving as lead author of the Committee's report, *Parenting Matters*. She is a past president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and has held leadership roles in the Society for Research in Child Development, including Co-Chair of the Black Caucus. Dr. Gadsden was Co-Editor-in-Chief of AERA's *Educational Researcher* and lead editor of the 2009 *Review of Research in Education*, and she is Co-Editor of the 2023 and 2025 *Review of Research in Education*. Her published works include book-length volumes and articles on early childhood research; literacy and African American youth; incarcerated parents in the lives of children, families, and communities; and risk, equity, and schooling. Dr. Gadsden is a Fellow of AERA and the Reading Hall of Fame. She is also a member of the National Academy of Education and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Gadsden earned her doctorate at the University of Michigan.

Introduction

The issues facing young children and their families in the United States and abroad have become increasingly daunting. Researchers across applied developmental science, education, and the broader social sciences point to the urgency of the problems—disparities in education, health, and income. Multiple reports and staggering national statistics underscore the magnitude of challenge and the significance of addressing the needs of the whole family and the whole child (e.g., Duncan & Le Menestrel, 2019; Gadsden et al., 2016).

The present is a particularly critical moment to examine these issues. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic heightened our sense of the complexities of the problems—particularly for historically marginalized communities—and only reinforced the intractability of long-standing issues of access, inequality, and systemic inequity. The ongoing global health crisis, rising violence, and social protests across the globe continue to shed light on the myriad disparities, the effects of which will likely be felt for decades, if not a lifetime (Yip, 2020). At the same time, the fields of early child care, early childhood education, and early child development are converging in meaningful ways and with a range of approaches to stem the tide of vulnerability and enhance the lives of children and families.

Research and practice since the early 1970s have expanded our understanding of the needs of young children and families, particularly those in low-income communities contending with poverty, systemic racism, and segregation. Advances in the study of early childhood learning and development highlight issues of context and culture (e.g., Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017) and point to the wide range of challenges facing children in diverse learning settings and homes (McWayne et al., 2019), the role of families in supporting young children (e.g., Gadsden et al., 2016), and the role of education and social systems (e.g., Crosnoe, 2020; Ryan et al., 2020). These and other works highlight that responding to the most pressing needs of young children and their families requires a clear understanding of the assets children bring to school and the resources within their closest relationships and immediate environment to mitigate the risks of the larger forces operating against their healthy development (Yosso, 2005). Successful efforts are contingent upon identifying and building on these child, family, and community strengths, and developing pathways and partnerships to utilize and bolster these resources, thereby creating the capacity to reduce risks and systemic barriers to life success.

The enemy is not simply the threats to children's well-being but also the lack of sustainable collaboration and family and community engagement to address

the needs of the whole child. On the one hand, we have learned a great deal about how children and their families navigate the shifting terrain of programs and policies, but on the other hand, our knowledge is still incomplete, as both the problems that children and families face persist and the contexts in which they live—or that are designed to serve them—are made increasingly vulnerable. The answers relate to how we conduct research, how we strengthen practice and support programs, and how we advance responsive policy. What is needed now to lift children and families are durable approaches to research-practice integration and stakeholder engagement that inform the utilization of knowledge and emerging methodologies.

This book is coming out during a pivotal time in the field and society—when the persistent problems of the past are being clearly situated in the present calls for change. The material herein is intended to capture our increasing understanding of the complex relationships between and across prevention and intervention science with young children and families, the persistence of racial and social disparities limiting opportunity for numerous children and families, and the failures of systems to collect and use information effectively to combat the problems faced by young children and families with the greatest need. Grounded in developmental-ecological-systems theory and the cultural and contextual dimensions of well-being, the volume draws on research across a range of fields to identify how effective approaches, new data technologies, and emerging information regarding social and cultural contexts can enhance hope and resilience for young children and their families living in poverty. The authors in this volume argue for a critical and dynamic approach to conceptualizing research conducted with young children and their families and to translating new knowledge into approaches that reflect the complex dimensions of children's lives in and outside of school and formal systems and the significance of families as resources for their children's development and well-being.

This book directs attention to the individual possibilities and intersecting dimensions of within-group, strengths-based, and population-based study in education, child development, and related fields. It is intended for a broad audience, including early childhood researchers, practitioners, and policy makers in education, human development, and other areas in the social and medical sciences whose interests focus on young children, families, and systems of support. In presenting some of the cutting-edge work in these areas by a range of researchers at different points in their careers, this book offers an agenda for a future in which partnership-based, research-practice integration can be used to improve approaches and systems for young children and their families.

Using a developmental-ecological-systems perspective that acknowledges the interplay of individual, context, and culture within and affecting all spheres influencing a child (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017), this book is divided into four sections. The first section has an introductory chapter written by Dr. John W. Fantuzzo, whose seminal research in early childhood development and education, integrated data systems, and community-based research partnerships inspires the chapters that follow (written by his former students, collaborators, and longtime colleagues) and who offers a thought-provoking perspective drawn from his more than 40 years in the field. The remaining nine chapters are then divided into three sections, each drawing on and providing analysis on a set of cross-cutting issues reflected in Fantuzzo's work. Following each section are commentaries by two experts in early childhood development, early childhood education, and

social policy: Section II: Eugene E. García and Marilou Hyson; Section III: Samuel J. Meisels and Hirokazu Yoshikawa; and Section IV: Daryl B. Greenfield and W. David Patterson. Jacqueline Jones offers the Afterword.

The main chapters in Sections II–IV were developed around three themes, designed to denote the intersections among child, family, and context and approaches to leveraging natural resources and multiple knowledges. Section II is focused on child-level strengths, as well as the social resources within families, extending the focus on children's social connections (often neglected in the educational equity literature) as a potent lever of success across the early childhood period. Lisa López and colleagues offer a stimulating analysis of research focused on social-emotional competence that centers low-income, Latine children and provide examples of the validation and adaptation of two social-emotional measures that better serve the needs of Latine children and the teachers who support them. Julia Mendez Smith and colleagues point to parents' essential role in shaping children's acquisition of prosocial skills and social competence and the shortage of measures of children's socialization experiences that are validated with culturally and linguistically diverse populations. In their chapter, they present scale development of a measure tapping parental beliefs about children's play, across several studies. The last chapter in this section, written by Christine McWayne and colleagues, highlights possibilities for addressing persistent issues that reduce opportunities to connect culturally diverse children, parents, and educators through responsive engagement and mutual respect.

The next section continues the focus on children's microsystems and mesosystems and centers strengths-based intervention as an antidote to deficit-oriented framing often imbibed in and perpetuated through the traditional evidence-based lens. Patricia Manz and Rachel Eisenberg provide a summary of their community-partnership research that forms the foundation of the Little Talks intervention for enhancing communication and language competence in infants and toddlers through home visiting services. Rebecca Bulotsky-Shearer and colleagues call our attention to the ways in which their partnership with teachers and parents evolved, leading to the creation and implementation of two programs: Learning to Objectively Observe Kids (LOOK) and the Making Connections for Teachers, Parents, and Children (an enhancement of the Teaching Pyramid Model). Last in this section, Katherine Barghaus and Cassandra Henderson offer a careful analysis of work emanating from the partnership between the Penn Child Research Center and the local Philadelphia school district, teachers, and families in the creation of a successful program, Conquering Kindergarten, a high-quality, report-card–based assessment of students' social-emotional learning (SEL) skills to a system of evidence-based supports that are confluent for teachers and families.

The last section moves into the exosystem, calling attention to an emerging national focus on interagency collaboration—specifically data-sharing—across systems serving vulnerable children and families. The section begins with a chapter by Katherine Barghaus and Della Jenkins that provides a landscape perspective on integrated data systems for early childhood and a conceptual framework for generating actionable intelligence for policy and practice, including examples across the life course of data use, from developing initial research questions based on salient policy and practice issues to using evidence to effect change in real time. Heather Rouse and colleagues remind us that complex problems require complex solutions, describing the development and implementation of an integrated data system co-created in a university–state partnership in Iowa, and demonstrating

the possibilities for sustaining change and ensuring scientific rigor and relevance. This section ends with Rebecca Bulotsky-Shearer and colleagues describing the historical context, development, and implementation of the Miami-Dade IDEAS (Integrating Data for Effectiveness Across Systems) Consortium for Children and offer an insider analysis of the pathways to creating and sustaining cross-sector sharing of administrative data for generating quality evidence to inform public policy and system reform.

As a former student of Fantuzzo (McWayne) and a long-time colleague-collaborator (Gadsden), we recognize that the issues in this volume are not limited to the authors' work, however significant their contributions, but are part of a rich, evolving core of work that they and others in our field have advanced in the best interests of young children and families. The discussions throughout this volume advocate for more inclusive perspectives in early childhood research, practice, and policy, while also providing illustrations through the chapter authors' research, much of it grounded in or influenced by Fantuzzo's work dating back to the late 1980s. All members of the intellectual community represented in this volume foreground emerging issues, re-examine perennial problems with new frameworks, and provide a forward-thinking agenda that contributes to efforts that support children and families, promotes partnerships that lead to the well-being of children and families, and aims to effect meaningful change.

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In honor of John W. Fantuzzo, Ph.D., whose
dedication to working for educational and social justice
inspires so many, and to the children, families, and early
childhood educators who teach us every day about hope and resilience

Introduction

Real, Ready, and Responsible Research for Change

Advancing Essential Relationships to Promote Child Well-Being and Equity

John W. Fantuzzo

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the volume by framing the distinctive features of the applied research approach shared by the authors. Using basic questions of inquiry, it surfaces distinctions by first emphasizing the authors' commitment to understand the Who and Why realities of children and families who have been historically underserved and marginalized in U.S. society. These realities need research based on genuine participant–researcher relationships and dedication to keeping the needs and strengths of the children and families at the center of all research efforts. The What of inquiry is a shared conceptual framework that maps out essential multilevel, child-centered relationships in the child's ecology that serve to advance child development and equity for this population. To fulfill this promise, major research foci include advancing the engagement competencies of children, families, and leaders of local education, health, and human service bureaucracies. The How, When, and Where distinction of this shared research approach reflects a set of standards and processes that guide the design and implementation of research to ensure that it is real, ready, and responsible to go the distance for the children and families served. Collectively, these distinctions represent an interrogation of traditional university-based research approaches that started with the Coleman Report of the 1960s and continued to the present to close opportunity gaps for historically marginalized children and families. This research presents an alternative approach for change that speaks to the needs of this moment

in U.S. society and offers hope for greater justice and an equality of educational opportunities.

REAL, READY, AND RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH FOR CHANGE: ADVANCING ESSENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS TO PROMOTE CHILD WELL-BEING AND EQUITY

We are at a challenging moment in our nation's history about the equitable promotion of the educational and social well-being of all our young children. It is a moment that calls for a disciplined interrogation of the merits of university-based research approaches to advancing the life success of young children who have not been included fully in opportunities given to many in U.S. society due to economic and ethnoracial issues. Furthermore, the distinctive needs and cultural strengths of these young children and their families have not been adequately acknowledged or respected, resulting in inequitable services. We need inquiry frameworks and processes that provide real, ready, and responsible production of actionable intelligence to inform policies and practices across education, health, and human services that intentionally benefit these young children and their families.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a distinctive body of work conducted by research teams in this book that share a common commitment, a conceptual framework, and an innovative approach to applied research for young children who have experienced sizable opportunity gaps associated with their ethnoracial, linguistic, and economic statuses. The most fundamental questions of inquiry (who, why, what, how, when, and where) will be used to show how this new work is distinctive and intentionally designed and implemented to make a measurable difference for young children and their families. Basically, this shared research looks to advance essential relationships at multiple levels within the child's ecology to promote child development and close opportunity gaps.

This chapter first addresses the Who and Why of the children who are the primary focus of this body of research. For this population it underscores why advancing beneficial relationships within the child's ecology is so essential. Second, the chapter singles out the What of advancing essential relationships that promote child development and learning. To do this it identifies a shared conceptual framework that maps out the key child-centered relationships that can provide opportunities for children across their ecology. The What of this inquiry also purposefully targets child, family, and community competencies that enable children to engage and become full participants in relationships that foster well-being and growth. Finally, the chapter will identify the shared research approach to producing actionable intelligence for promoting child well-being. The How, Where, and When of the approach informed by the conceptual framework generates usable knowledge to benefit those served. This section will illustrate how the shared characteristics of this approach contribute to making

the inquiry process real, ready, and responsible for the children and families served.

SHARED WHO AND WHY OF INQUIRY

The Population of Children and Families Served

This section underscores the common Who and Why of this body of research. The recognition of Who and Why brings the authors together to address one of the highest national priorities for social problem solving in the United States today—the education, health, and welfare of young children who are set back the most by social and educational opportunity gaps. Public school entry first exposes these gaps. Sizeable gaps in children's readiness to meet the expectations of public school are evident at kindergarten entry, and if these gaps are not effectively addressed, they lead to significant and persistent academic achievement gaps and increased likelihood of other social problems (Bradbury et al., 2015; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Unfortunately, these gaps in readiness and achievement reflect systemic, societal inequities in opportunity experienced by groups of young children and families who face many barriers to positive early growth, including lack of equitable access or discrimination based on economic or ethnoracial factors. These factors relate to significant disconnections in relationships across the child's ecology at multiple levels. Decades of persistent and immutable achievement gaps reflect the shortcomings of U.S. policies, practices, and national will to close these gaps. The researchers in this volume have chosen to apply their research to better understand, conceptualize, and respond to these gaps for the benefit of young children and families from minoritized groups. These children have not received the same level of opportunities and services as their more privileged peers or instead have received culturally misaligned services not focused on their strengths or needs. Less access to opportunities or receiving culturally inappropriate services reveals engrained societal ignorance, neglect, or intentional ill will toward meeting their unique needs. To make matters worse, these gaps and needs are often incorrectly attributed to entire groups of children and used to impugn their cultural, ethnic, and economic histories instead of accurately acknowledging them as inequities in the provision of nurture, respect, and support to meet academic expectations.

There is no shortage of research documenting decades of economic and ethnoracial gaps in academic achievement (Hansen et al., 2018) and a litany of risks and poor outcomes associated with poverty and segregated disadvantage (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). However, there is less research centered on building authentic relationships within the child's ecology to make visible child, family, and community strengths and to build more culturally aligned assessments and interventions to bridge gaps and promote child well-being and equity. To conduct this type of research requires making a personal commitment to

form genuine relationships with children and their families to be on a path to understand the realities experienced by them. This is the commitment and focus the authors in this volume have—a research agenda centered on finding and promoting relationship strengths in these communities with culturally valid methods to forge multiple beneficial connections. To set up authentic reciprocal relationships with participants who have been historically marginalized, researchers must recognize the dignity of the Who and demonstrate a willingness to understand the Why of their experience. This involves a recognition that obtaining personal data on the functioning of children and families is personal both for the ones who are giving their information and, to be genuine, for the ones who are receiving it. The necessity and significance of this basic truth was made real and personal to me in the early 1990s in a West Philadelphia community meeting of African American parents and community advocates who were trying to shut down my well-funded and well-intentioned university-based research there. My teacher was a young African American mother of a Head Start child from West Philadelphia who had attended this meeting.

Significance of a Researcher's Personal Commitment to Who and Why

My life's commitment has been to serving young children and their families who are experiencing segregated disadvantage in large urban centers due to economic and ethnoracial inequities. For three and a half decades, my work has been in these Philadelphia neighborhoods, with Philadelphia being the poorest of the 10 largest cities (Pew Charitable Trust, 2018) and one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States (Buckholz, 2022). Here, my work has been shaped by the beautiful young children and families I have been honored to serve and the opportunity I have been given to witness our society's unresponsiveness to their needs and strengths.

My first teacher in Philadelphia was a young African American mother in a loud, tumultuous meeting of African American Head Start parents who were trying to stop my first federally funded Head Start research project. When I first came to the University of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Head Start program's school district director asked me to write a grant to help them study and learn how to support socially withdrawn preschoolers who have experienced various forms of trauma associated with poverty. The district wanted these children to engage more fully in interactive peer play to foster their classroom engagement and learning. I received a federal grant to conduct this work. However, when news circulated among the parents about this grant, it unexpectedly generated a crisis. Rumors were flying around that a White researcher from the University of Pennsylvania was working with the government to track Black children for the government and "research them." A group of parent leaders went to the media and local congressional offices to stop the project. In fact,

these parent leaders were paying other parents to say "no" to participating in this research. They had found the measures the researchers were asking parents and teachers to complete about their children's conduct problems in the classroom to be offensive. The director informed me that she would have to stop the project. There was, however, one chance to save the project: I would have to attend a meeting where the parents had assembled the press and major advocacy groups and face their accusations. I accepted this invitation to understand better why they were so upset. As the meeting began, adults were firing questions at me from all directions, and I was unable to answer their rapid-fire questions until one young mother holding her child boldly told everyone to be quiet. She then turned to me when the shouting stopped. There was a pause before she spoke, and our eyes met. I could see the hurt and anger in her eyes. It was an anger that I had seen before and a pain that was a major part of my personal Who and Why purpose.

This was an intense moment for me as the mother's interrogation invoked the Who and Why of my personal research commitment—one rooted in my early childhood experiences. On July 24, 1964, the neighborhood where I was born and raised experienced a racial explosion that was set off by police maltreatment of a young African American man at a street dance (Christopher & Eison, 2007). This incident set off 3 days of bedlam in my neighborhood, resulting in deaths, hundreds of injured and arrested residents, and the presence of the National Guard to quell the conflict. This was the first time that the National Guard was called out to a northeastern city for such a conflict. This was my childhood neighborhood in Rochester, New York—an unlikely epicenter of racial conflict. The neighborhood was originally an immigrant neighborhood of segregated poverty and housing projects. During the first 10 years of my life, this neighborhood absorbed nearly all of the 300% increase in African Americans who migrated to Rochester from the South looking for work at Kodak, and Xerox, and other burgeoning companies. The racial conflict was the culmination of escalating racial tension over mistreatment, discrimination, and lack of opportunity for poor African Americans and immigrants concentrated in this neighborhood.

My grandparents came to this neighborhood as poor Italian immigrants looking for opportunities. After my dad came back from World War II, he married my mom, and they found subsidized housing in this neighborhood. I was a White child in a predominantly African American community. The traumatic event in July 1964 was a turning point in so many ways—for civil rights in the United States, for the city, for my neighborhood, and for me. I was fortunate to have positive relationships with African American children and adults in my community. I felt loved and cared for even though there were many things I did not understand. Why was my neighborhood called "the bottom" and other negative names, and why were there so many police cars patrolling our streets? Those who

loved me helped me try to make meaning out of the fear, hurt, and anger I witnessed from my African American neighbors that erupted in July 1964. The kindness afforded to me by my neighbors gave me a context over time to see how these economic and racial conflicts were associated with deeply entrenched social injustices distinctively experienced by African Americans and other people of color living in distressed urban communities such as mine.

My early experiences of poverty and exposure to racial injustice put me on a path with many twists and turns that eventually led me to becoming a professor in the Penn Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to coming to Philadelphia, I spent my early academic career as a clinical psychologist conducting research in Rochester with young victims of child maltreatment in specialized preschool settings. Although I was trained in a medical model of mental health, I soon rejected this focus on deficiency and disorder and instead embraced a more developmental, community-based model. I also made Head Start one of my strategic foci and had the opportunity of being inspired by social and educational reform leaders such as Edward Zigler, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and James Comer—scholars and pioneers innovating and generating opportunities for young children of color from low-income households with a strengths-based, developmental focus. I sought a position in Philadelphia intentionally because of its levels of deep poverty and segregated disadvantage. The demographics of many of its neighborhoods were very much like those of my childhood in Rochester. I was eager to develop close ties with community leaders and public service providers serving young African American and Latinx children living in these economically distressed and segregated neighborhoods.

So, here I was in this intense situation facing a mother's hurt and anger and waiting for her interrogation. After a brief silence, she said, "I have just three *questions* for **you**!" She then asked me three penetrating questions pinpointing the significance of the Who and Why for applied researchers: *What are YOU doing here? Who are you? What will you do to help me and my babies?*

All three questions speak to the critical importance of relationships to achieve meaningful change. They reveal the necessity of first addressing mistrust associated with separation and disconnection.

What Are YOU Doing Here?   This question speaks to the reality of difference, segregation, and disconnection that fuels mistrust. Thoreau said, "It is not what you look at that matters, it is what you see." What this mother saw was a male professor of White privilege from a multibillion-dollar, Ivy League university that was just a few miles east of her neighborhood but socioculturally very far away. She saw a White man disconnected from the segregated space where she lived, one with far fewer opportunities and possibilities than those readily accessible to the university population. What she saw was a significant separation between her family and me with their past and present not predicting a future of great opportunity and

possibility for her child and community. She said to me loudly and clearly that *race and place matter,* and that these palpable differences that separate and cause pain must be acknowledged and understood before I could receive an authentic informed consent. The no's that were between us were substantial and they must be addressed first. Was I willing to understand the multiple meanings of potential participants' no's ("informed dissent") to earn the trust I need to receive a genuine yes?

Who Are YOU?   This was the question that moved beyond the walls of separation and mistrust of perceived interlopers to probe my humanity and get personal. What I heard was her interest in what was beyond our obvious differences on the outside—she wanted to know what was on the *inside*. She called me out. Could I reveal my true intent? What was in my heart towards African American children and families? Would I listen? Did I care? Was I concerned about what concerned her? Would I yield my privilege and be responsive to the realities of African American families living in her West Philadelphia neighborhood?

This question provided an opening for me to be real and transparent—an opportunity for me to reveal my true reasons for being in her neighborhood. She did not know what was truly in my heart, but she was giving me an opportunity to share my purpose and commitment. This was an opportunity for me to reveal my sincere love for the children and families in this community and my desire for them to receive the educational justice they deserved. This mother was giving me an opportunity of expression that was not afforded to her, although she had much to say about her concerns for her children's well-being and education. In response, I embraced the words of the Persian poet Rumi: "Let the beauty of what you love be what you do." Real relationships require researchers to be in touch with their humanity and open to genuine two-way communication of their purpose with those whom they hope to serve. If researchers can do so, the possibilities for effective collaboration will be realized. The truth is that these relationships are not the means to the researcher's end; they are the end that creates the true means.

WHAT Will You Do to Help Me and My Babies?   This third question is key because it shows this mother's vulnerability and hope for what might come from our relationship. It identifies two ingredients to setting up a productive participant-researcher relationship that could lead to meaningful change. First, she shared her sincere awareness of the needs of her child and family and her openness to receiving useful assistance to meet these needs from trustworthy "helpers." Second, this question reflects her sincere interest in knowing whether the researcher's inquiry of their needs would connect her child and family to opportunities that would lead to substantively meeting these needs.

These three questions call for an authentic researcher response forged in real relationships based on the priorities of the who and why—relationships

that pass the participants' informed dissent interrogation and build public trust that results in a focus on the most relevant research foci that fit their ecology. These relationships provide hope for effective change and real opportunities for growth and well-being. These questions bring us to the threshold of the What of our inquiry. What we need is actionable intelligence proven to be effective, efficient, and equitable that does not exclude but intentionally includes and prioritizes the perspectives of those who have been historically sidelined. Our priority for developing an applied research agenda is with those in our society who have been disproportionately disconnected or thwarted from opportunities to build essential relationships that promote development and close the opportunity gaps for their children. How do their needs and concerns shape the What of our research agenda designed to serve them?

SHARED WHAT OF INQUIRY

Unpacking the Who and Why of shared inquiry leads directly to the shared What of this inquiry—applied research advancing essential child-centered relationships across the child's ecology to promote child development opportunities and equity. This section presents the What—a shared comprehensive conceptual approach to developing these key relationships. It also presents three strategic research foci designed to build competencies across the child's ecology to support relationship development: 1) child competencies that advance relationships with teachers and peers in early childhood education; 2) family engagement competencies that advance their relationships with teachers and administrators to support the child's relationship competencies and ensure the cultural alignment of their children's learning experiences; and 3) community-collaboration competencies that use integrated data systems to establish relationships across education, health, and human services bureaucracies to support the well-being of the whole child.

Conceptual Framework to Advance Vital Relationship Opportunities

A developmental ecological understanding of child development first crafted by Urie Bronfenbrenner is the guiding conceptual framework shared by the authors in this book (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Fundamentally, this framework postulates that child development and learning occur in a dynamic, multilevel relationship ecology. These bidirectional relationships directly meet or indirectly meet children's essential needs for nurture, respect, and expect to develop the necessary competencies for early school success. Nurture is the child-centered care that forms the critical bond between children and their caregivers. It is a sustainable commitment of care to meet the vital needs of the whole child. Respect reveals the nurturing one's basic acknowledgment that each child is a unique individual who requires care providers to be child-centered and

learn from the child what makes them unique. Respect requires providers to use this knowledge to be most responsive to meeting the child's individual needs and respecting their unique growth trajectory. This knowledge enables care providers to adjust their growth expectations of the child to help the child acquire the competencies necessary to transact with the expectations of the child's context. Expect displays care providers' intentional pathway of cumulative and progressive growth expectations of the child's functioning tailored to help each child learn how to competently meet these expectations across all the key contexts in the child's ecology. These expectations are, therefore, child-centered and culturally aligned to be responsive to the genuine characteristics of the child and the child's family and community. Each of these relationship needs are necessary and interdependent. Therefore, expect based on respect and sustained by nurture actualizes the power of the relationship to help the child reach their full growth potential. Meeting these relationship needs enables children to successfully meet progressive expectations and prepares them to make their own unique contributions to society. Impediments to establishing these critical relationships diminish support from the most influential caregivers and result in delays or underdevelopment of essential school readiness competencies for the child and undesirable developmental and educational outcomes.

A distinctive contribution of this approach is that it recognizes that there are manifold nested influences that impact children in their relationship ecology that shape individual developmental pathways. These factors directly and indirectly promote or hinder the child's course of development over time. The direct influences come from the most proximal care providers who are at the core of this relationship ecology (microsystem). They are the hands that touch the little hands—the core nurturers and most direct and immediate care providers. They are all the critical human relationships that influence the child through daily contact and routines of nurture, respect, and expect. Most proximal and, therefore, most influential for young children are the home, child care, and school care providers. There are other care providers who offer a range of direct services to foster growth, although their contact is less immediate and intense (e.g., direct service providers in health, child welfare, and recreational or other community organizations).

A child's growth is influenced indirectly in the relationship ecology by transactions *among* direct care providers (mesosystem). This form of proximal indirect support comes from cooperative bidirectional relationships between the child's direct care providers. Parents collaborating with teachers and primary care physicians and other direct care providers or collaborations between a teacher and other professional service providers working directly with the child are examples of these indirect relationship influences on the child. Their contributions to the child's growth are also a function of how intentionally these relationships are child-centered and

focused on nurturing, respecting, and expecting in the best interest of the child's growth and well-being.

In addition, in this relationship ecology there are other indirect influences that are a bit more distal to the child but nonetheless impactful. These are made up of various governing personnel and structures that dictate and regulate how direct care providers deliver services to promote child well-being. These are executive leaders who oversee the work of the direct providers and their collaborations. They regulate resources and support provided by the child's direct care providers across service bureaucracies—for example, supervisors of child care workers or administrators of schools who do not work directly with the child but work with the child's care providers (exosystem). Finally, the most indirect and distal influences are the larger governance structures charged to enact the policies and distribute the resources to the major health, education, and welfare systems responsible societally to meet children's needs. These more macro government or societal entities broadly influence the policies that shape the nature and extent of opportunities provided by service bureaucracies. Their societal mandate is to ensure that all services are provided in the best interest of the child and that they are delivered equitably to all children. Each executive leader of local, state, or federal government or leader of a service bureaucracy is an indirect influencer of child well-being responsible for policies and the pipeline of services to children and families.

This model was first created by Bronfenbrenner and other child development innovators in response to heightened awareness of economic, racial, and educational inequities experienced by young children and families in the 1960s during the Civil Rights movement. Architects of educational and social reform such as Edward Zigler and scholars of African American child well-being such as child psychiatrist James Comer used federal funds from President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty to apply variants of this framework to develop federal and university-based approaches to education, health, and social services reform to close these gaps for young, underserved children and families of color living in poverty. The most notable of these federal programs is Head Start (Zigler & Styfco, 2010). From the developmental and educational knowledge base, these innovators shaped child-centered programs primarily to serve children in low-income households who were disproportionately children of color living in segregated, high needs jurisdictions. These programs all emphasized the necessity of 1) targeting strategic underdeveloped child competencies associated with building strong relationships with early childhood educators and peers; 2) engaging families in the education of their children in a respectful, culturally appropriate manner; and 3) forming relationships between early educators and the wider network of health and human service providers that address societal challenges impacting those children experiencing major societal opportunity gaps in education, housing, nutrition, and family and community safety.

Child Competencies and Engagement in Learning and Family Engagement in Education

Guided by a conceptual framework defining development and learning as a function of building essential relationships, this body of research emphasizes the importance of building strategic social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies that advance relationships for children in early education classrooms. Development of these vital competencies is in line with Maslow's conception of attending to a hierarchy of basic needs necessary for human achievement and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). They reflect a child's fundamental social engagement competencies that allow them to effectively connect and form productive classroom relationships with teachers and peers in their learning community. Social engagement provides the opportunity to meet self-esteem needs and develop academic engagement competencies that provide the child with confidence, motivation, and persistence to stay connected to classroom learning and excel at initiating and mastering learning goals and objectives. These critical SEL engagement competencies establish a foundation for the cumulative and progressive self-actualization of academic competencies. Not surprisingly, these SEL competencies have been found in the research literature to be strong predictors of educational success and well-being (Matthews et al., 2010), and setting up these foundational engagement skills early can help all students create positive trajectories throughout their education (Jones et al., 2017). These benefits include better academic performance, persistence in high school and college, and enhanced overall adjustment and well-being into adulthood (Bundick et al., 2014).

Developers of the national Head Start program acknowledged these needs of the children being served and originally found that the goal of the program was to prioritize enhancing the social competence of young children from low-income families. In cases such as these, social competence was defined as a child's everyday effectiveness of functioning and adjusting to the demands for SEL competencies in our public school classroom learning environments (Zigler & Styfco, 2010). Children of color from low-income households needed early educators to prioritize these essential SEL engagement competencies. Developers and African American scholars such as Comer and colleagues (1996) recognized that societal inequities associated with poverty and discrimination disproportionally required families to use their constrained resources to secure their children's basic biological and safety needs in Maslow's hierarchy and were not able to pay as much attention to the development of higher level SEL needs. Therefore, at public school entry these children were at risk for delays in the development of these SEL skills when compared with their more privileged peers who had more opportunities to develop these competencies. Because these SEL readiness skills were present in privileged peers, they were not a major focus of their early elementary school curriculum, which emphasized primarily cognitive academic skills.

These inequities and presumptions continue to hinder young children with underdeveloped SEL engagement skills from fully receiving help from learning activities in the classroom that require these skills. Unfortunately, these disconnects in engagement, along with other sociocultural misalignments, put children at risk for being misperceived as having "behavior problems" that require "management," rather than being taught the SEL engagement skills needed to foster early literacy and mathematics instruction. With no meaningful instruction in SEL skills, children with underdeveloped SEL skills are at risk of being left behind with their basic needs neglected and labeled as having "problems." Furthermore, this deficit-based approach inhibits educators from recognizing the cultural strengths children bring to the classroom, which get misread, dismissed, or neglected entirely (Comer, 1998).

Labeling, misattributions, and sociocultural misperceptions of these children increase the likelihood of tension and conflict between their families and educators that can result in more disconnects and cultural misalignments. Furthermore, the greater the sociocultural differences between families and educators and the focus on "child deficits," the greater the likelihood of disconnects and the decreased likelihood that children will get the support and instruction necessary to foster vital SEL competencies (Grice, 2020). In this scenario, both child engagement and family engagement in education are at risk. A top-down education system delivered by predominantly White administrators and teachers emphasizing cognitive academic skills at the expense of SEL engagement skills put teachers and families of color at risk for missing opportunities to work together to develop these essential SEL engagement skills. This places a premium on research that intentionally prioritizes culturally aligned family engagement to improve these at-risk relationships between the child's most influential caregivers. The challenge is to supply actionable intelligence to influence the public education bureaucracy. What is needed is bidirectionally building family engagement competencies to give families more power, voice, and agency to help educators advance children's underdeveloped SEL competencies and to be more culturally aware of misalignments and misperceptions of their children's needs (Grice, 2020).

Community Engagement to Support Children's Learning

True to our developmental ecological framework, the What of child-centered research must include investigating ways to build positive relationships between education systems and the other relevant health and human service bureaucracies charged to meet the needs of children and their families. To build these positive relationships and close opportunity gaps for low-income, underserved groups of students, we must recognize that the education bureaucracy cannot be education service islands,

isolated from other helping agencies in the community and focused only on advancing academic achievement. A child-centered approach to education requires interagency coordination and collaboration to truly serve the needs of the whole child.

The problem preventing these necessary cross-system relationships is the siloed nature of our bureaucracies, which are necessary to the public administration of services for children and families. Bureaucracies focus on how government organizes itself into separate service compartments to get things done. The dysfunction exists because when the nature of the social problem hurting young children requires simultaneously addressing multiple areas of need, the boundaries between service bureaucracies are too rigid to permit coordination and collaboration (Daniels et al., 2006). Orthogonal bureaucracies with rigid boundaries charged to address separate human functions fail when the problem affects multiple human functions (Kettl, 2009). In 21st century America, it is no longer possible to assign responsibility for a major, complex social problem such as large and persistent national achievement gaps to a single bureaucracy. Our siloed education, health, and human service bureaucracies are handicapped to act on behalf of the whole child because they lack the abilities to transact across their bureaucratic silos. To meet children's needs, we need innovative research to build bidirectional relationships across bureaucracies to enable decisive, coordinated intergovernmental responses. One of the major research projects featured in this volume addresses this What and discusses approaches to build and use evidence-based intergovernmental capacities that integrate relevant child and family information across bureaucracies to generate opportunities for the whole child.

Several authors in this volume are contributors to a national movement that looks to increase intergovernmental responsiveness to serve our Who and Why population. This movement is called the Integrated Data Systems (IDS) approach (Fantuzzo & Culhane, 2015; Heidbreder, 2016). IDS is a developed research, planning, and evaluation resource used to support effective and efficient intergovernmental intervention at all levels of children's services. It is designed to use administrative data across health, education, and human service sectors to conduct scientifically sound research inquiries for the purpose of providing actionable intelligence to improve policy and practice for children and families (Fantuzzo et al., 2017). The work of these authors will show the importance of integrating quality administrative data across bureaucracies to facilitate policy-relevant research and continuous quality improvement of existing programs serving children and families. Their articles will illustrate how built and used IDS can generate data-driven solutions motivating state and local government to intentionally take down bureaucratic silos and foster effective intergovernmental collaborations to generate more opportunities for our children.

SHARED HOW, WHERE, WHEN OF INQUIRY

Modus Operandi to Produce Actionable Intelligence for Change

Now that we have prioritized the Who and Why and have strategically targeted the What of shared research foci, attention is turned to the How, Where, and When of a shared research approach. This section identifies the following distinctive components of this modus operandi to producing actionable intelligence for change:

1. Establish strategic research partnerships across key stakeholders in the child's relationship ecology.

2. Build the necessary research capacities to produce real and ready assessments and interventions to promote child and family competencies for change that are respectful and culturally aligned.

3. Ensure a responsible process of inquiry that is designed to go the distance to produce sustainable changes in policy and practice to advance child well-being and achieve equity.

Establishing Essential Research Partnerships   It should be no surprise that the systematic ways of conducting applied research to serve the selected population of children and families reflect the shared conceptual approach. The primary goal of this guiding framework is to establish and advance multiple beneficial relationships to foster child development. Therefore, the effectiveness of this work is a direct function of forming strategic research partnerships with all the major stakeholders in the relationship ecology of the child and family. Respect for both the distinctive contributions of each partner and the bidirectional nature of the partnership is necessary to achieve the goal of measurable and sustainable opportunities for children to eliminate opportunity gaps.

Figure 1.1 represents the research partnerships that are considered essential to this approach to produce meaningful change for children and families. In the center of the diamond is the child. In accord with our conceptual framework, this symbolizes that all essential research relationships are child-centered and set up only for the purpose of serving what is in the best interests of the child. At each corner of the diamond is an important category of research partners that is necessary to produce actionable intelligence to help children. In the Who and Why section earlier, it was established how critical it is for researchers to develop authentic bidirectional relationships with the children's families and their local cultural communities. These stakeholders serve as direct beneficiaries of the research for their children and arbiters of the extent that the research agenda is child-centered and culturally aligned or misaligned. Practitioners are the next critical category of partners. They are the ones who supply direct services to the children and families, and they are the partners who are expected

Essential Research Partnerships

Figure 1.1. Essential research partnerships.

to take the evidence-based interventions for change that result from the research process and apply them directly to help children and families over time. The final category of partners is the executive leaders of the relevant health, education, and human service agencies involved in the research. As noted in the previous section, executive leaders are the gatekeepers of the relevant government or other public service bureaucracies managing the delivery of practitioners' services to children and families and setting the policies governing these services. Executive leaders are critical to the research enterprise because they authorize the research to be conducted, allow the use of agency administrative data for research purposes, oversee the involvement of agency personnel, and ultimately are responsible for changing policies and practices based on the resulting actionable intelligence discovered to improve the quality of services.

As the diamond in Figure 1.1 reveals, this is a complex network of bidirectional relationships that are all critical to producing sustainable opportunities to advance child well-being and equity. To form real partnerships, researchers must look to understand the realities and distinctive contributions of these partners at each corner of the diamond. Failure to establish genuine two-way relationships with any of these key partners

will be a fatal flaw to the ultimate mission and integrity of research designed to advance equitable relationship opportunities for the Who and Why this research looks to serve. Only in a relationship environment of mutual respect and collaboration can researchers ensure the transparency needed to build public trust and ensure that all stakeholders keep the child's interests central to the collaboration, and that the special interests of one group do not overshadow the best interests of the child.

Real, Ready, and Responsible Methods and Process   To be true to the network of partners around the diamond, the authors in this volume share a commitment to provide research methods that are real, ready, and responsible to advance all young children's opportunities in their relationship ecology. These methods are distinguished both by the standards used to conduct this applied research and the process followed to actualize these standards. Real, ready, and responsible are the overarching standards of conduct applied in a logical, disciplined process designed to go the distance for the children.

Real   The real standard shows a commitment to state-of-the art empirical inquiry drawn from developmental and educational sciences for our population of children and families. Real means the methods must have empirical validity for our participants in every facet of the research. Real interrogates the suitability of using widely used methods in inquiries focused on underserved groups of children. What variables are particularly salient to the inquiry, and do we know that our measures of these variables are valid for our participants? The measures used must pass our "real test": Is there actual empirical research documenting the validity of the measurement for our participants? Historically underserved populations are populations that have been "underserved" or overlooked in assessment research, particularly in early childhood (Barghaus et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, measures have been used in studies with underserved populations that have not been validated for use with these children, rendering their findings and decisions based on these findings "unreal." For example, the items in these measures might be culturally misaligned, hold implicit biases toward these children and families, or have response formats that are culturally unfamiliar to respondents and, in the case of children, might require skills they do not possess because they have not yet been expected to use them. All these measurement problems can produce invalid results and reify biases and distortions about the children and families. To illustrate the necessity of this real standard for our population, I will share real research that interrogated the validity of two widely used measures with African American children from low-income households that were flagged as inappropriate by our African American Head Start parents and teachers in West Philadelphia.

One of these measures was the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) parent-report assessment (Achenbach, 1991). This is a measure of 118 items derived

from clinical case files chosen to represent eight psychiatric syndromes and used to identify higher-order Internalizing and Externalizing dimensions of behavior problems. The CBCL has been widely used in high-stakes evaluations of the efficacy of federal programs for children from low-income households who are disproportionately children of color. A major evaluation of one such program, the Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP), used the CBCL as one of its main measures to evaluate the effectiveness of CCDP. This evaluation included a large representative, low-income sample of young African American children. The CBCL found no behavioral benefit of CCDP, and this program was defunded and eliminated. Fortunately, the evaluation data set was preserved, and it had item-level data on the CBCL that enabled us to examine its validity for these young African American children. Our study found that the Externalizing and Internalizing behavioral dimensions of the CBCL were not valid for use with these African American children (LeBoeuf et al., 2010). Because these dimensions were not valid, the evaluation findings that the CCDP had no positive effects on Externalizing and Internalizing behavior were deemed faulty for this group of children. Furthermore, there was no empirical evidence of the eight behavioral syndromes for which the CBCL was designed to identify. An exploratory factor analysis found only a single reliable factor that only accounted for 20% of the 118 CBCL items. The retention of less than one-third of the items shows that most items included in the CBCL are not appropriate for measuring problem behaviors for a community sample of young African American children living in low-income households. This study indicated that the West Philadelphia parents were right—this measure should not be used to assess their children.

Next, we conducted a Q-sort, qualitative study to understand why this measure was invalid for this population (Perry et al., 2013). We asked African American Head Start parents to first sort all the CBCL items into categories to show the degree that they felt uncomfortable answering each question honestly about their children. Then, they were asked to sort those questions they would not answer honestly into four categories according to their reasons why: Need More Information, Do Not Understand, Offensive, and Threatening. We found that the parents would not answer honestly about 25% of the CBCL items. When asked to consider why they were uncomfortable with these items, the two most frequent reasons were that they found the questions to be offensive or threatening. During subsequent interviews, the parents reported that they were concerned that if they answered these questions honestly about their child's "antisocial" or "disruptive" behavior problems, they would be contributing to stereotypes of Black children. The parents were also concerned that these reports might draw unwanted attention to their family from child protective service agencies. These responses were clearly not known or anticipated by the test developer or the program evaluators, but their impact is clear: the findings were invalid.

Another example of the necessity of real interrogations of a widely used measure is a study of a direct child assessment, the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA) (Harter & Pike, 1984). Our West Philadelphia African American parents and teachers questioned the appropriateness of this measure for their Head Start children. Two compelling facts justified their concerns. A comprehensive search of the first decade of this widely used measure revealed that over half the studies involved children from low-income households and 70% of the studies included young African American children. However, the original validation sample included only 90 White middle-class children, all from one geographic area near Denver.

There was no evidence supporting the validity of the PSPCSA's use with African American children and for more than a decade this was not questioned. We tested the real use of the PSPCSA with multiple, large samples of African American Head Start children and found the scales to be invalid, and no support was found for any alternative psychological constructs (Fantuzzo et al., 1996). Instead, the results showed that the factors obtained for these children were random constellations of items that supplied no valid information about children's perceptions of their competencies or social acceptance.

Next, we empirically evaluated the appropriateness of the response formats for these children to explain the lack of validity and assessed whether the children understood the response format and demonstrated the prerequisite skills required to respond. This study revealed that only one child out of 153 randomly selected African American Head Start children in our sample demonstrated full comprehension of the required major administration tasks of the PSPCSA, and therefore all but this one child was unable to respond reliably. The developers of this measure presumed that African American children from low-income households had these skills to respond to the questions, but they never actually tested this presumption. Therefore, the findings derived from this measure were faulty; as parents and teachers feared and science confirmed, the findings were not real for these children. A decade of use without testing exposed the presumption and injustice of using this measure to characterize these children. The parents and teachers were right again.

Ready   The ready standard focuses on the utility of inquiry to advance realistic intervention opportunities for our population of children and families that are responsive to their needs and can be readily used by their children's care providers. The demand here is to produce real actionable intelligence that will be used by the direct or indirect contributors to the children's development and learning in their ecology (i.e., partners around the diamond in Figure 1.1). The commitment is to co-construct a research agenda with our network of research partners to ensure that what is being developed and validated by real evidence fits the child's ecology and can be used realistically

to benefit the children and families. We want to be sure that the findings "help the helpers" in the child's relationship ecology to improve their nurture, respect, and expect for the children. The goal is to intentionally generate practical intervention responses to meet actual needs that will advance necessary competencies to promote enhanced relationship opportunities for the children. This standard recognizes the futility of developing and validating myopic research that cannot practically be used by caregivers in the child's home, school, or community. Not to respect all the relevant contributors around the diamond is to produce research that is not child-centered and ready to be used by the natural helpers in the child's ecology, and therefore it is highly unlikely to be used to benefit the children.

One illustration from our Philadelphia research of combining real and ready actionable intelligence is the development and validation of a comprehensive evidence-based curriculum program called EPIC (Evidence-Based Program for Integrated Curricula) for the largest Head Start grantee in Philadelphia. In partnership with administrators, teachers, and families, researchers developed valid and reliable multidimensional assessments of children's language, literacy, and mathematics competencies (Learning Express) (McDermott et al., 2009) and children's social-emotional learning skills (Learning-to-Learn Scales) (McDermott et al., 2011). These measures were used to create a real empirical sequence for all distinctive skills, from lower to higher levels of competencies. Data from the implementation of these measures were used to inform the integration of skill levels for the development of an evidence-based integrated curriculum. Drawing on this knowledge and with parent support, researchers partnered with exemplary Head Start teachers from the program to create a cumulative and progressive sequence of rich activities nested in eight units of instruction. These rich activities were based on best practices to advance academic and social-emotional learning competencies intentionally and simultaneously. To be true to the rich educational ecology of an early childhood classroom, learning activities were developed across major evidence-based instructional methods in early childhood (e.g., large and small group activities, dialogic reading, use of formative assessments, transition activities, use of key vocabulary). Built into each curriculum unit were activities called "home connections," which were engaging, home-based learning activities carefully aligned with the curriculum and designed to connect home and school educators. The activities were created in partnership with parent leaders. Once EPIC was developed, it was instituted as standard practice in over 50 randomly selected classrooms with regular program support. In partnership with the executive leadership, a fully randomized trial was conducted over the course of an entire year to test the efficacy of the many dimensions of EPIC to advance critical school readiness skills and to support teachers and families. EPIC was found to be effective with high rates of satisfaction around the diamond of key partners (Fantuzzo et al., 2011). Designed to be real and ready, and built from the ground up tailored to the

children's actual skill level, EPIC built upon the indigenous strengths of the teacher and family educators, and fit the ecology of the classroom, home, and program. It gave all the partners a base and opportunity for continuous quality improvement (to be real in drawing on the local strengths of all partners) and to refine and improve its efficacy and efficiency (to be ready to effect positive change for children and families).

Responsible   Responsible speaks to the extent of a researcher's commitment to the participants and their communities. Is the research a one-time inquiry project "brought to you by" the sole self-interest of the researcher and some outside funder, or does it reflect a responsible relationship commitment to the child and all the partners around the diamond to a systemic inquiry process that goes the distance? Going the distance is conducting a real, ready, and responsible process. Figure 1.2 shows that this process starts with compassionate awareness that makes visible, with real measures, the relevant relationships among all the measurable variables that are hypothesized to significantly enhance competencies and meet needs. These are real variables that can be used to produce meaningful changes for the child. This actionable evidence then supplies useful information to formulate an evidence-based theory of change to guide the development of realistic interventions for change in the child's relationship ecology. This

Real, Ready, and Responsible Process Designed to Go the Distance!

Responsible and Sustainable Refinements
Engage in continuous quality improvements to ensure effectiveness and sustainability

Ready Logical Response
Build a logical intervention to respond well to needs and realistically fit the ecology

Real Compassionate Awareness
Make visible relevant needs and competencies to inform a reasoned response
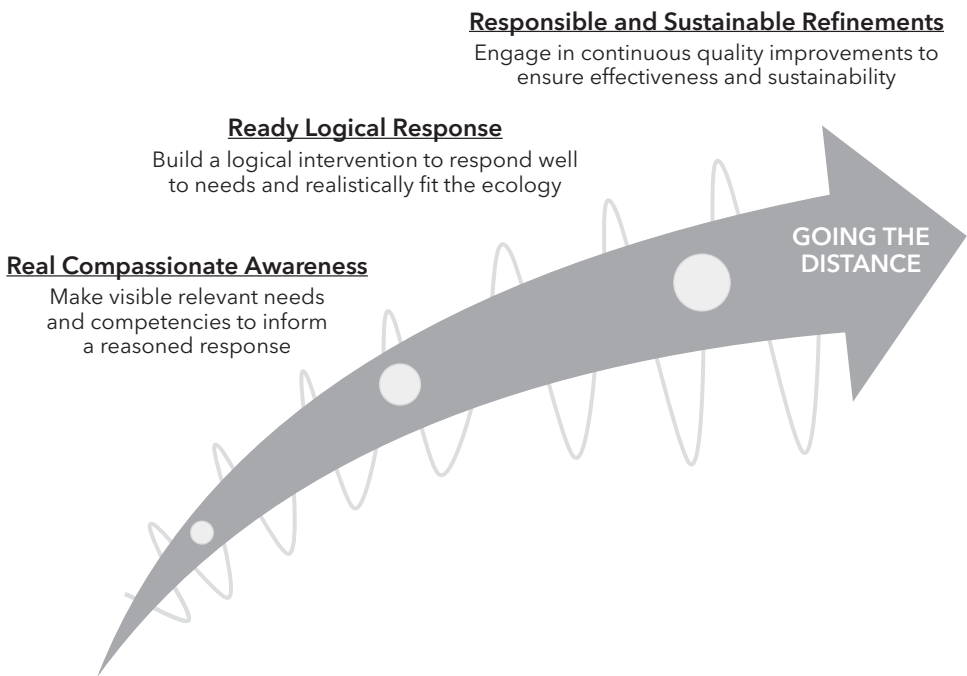
GOING THE DISTANCE

Figure 1.2.   Real, ready, and responsible process designed to go the distance!

step in the process develops a hypothesis for intervention effectiveness that can be subjected to empirical tests of its fidelity and efficacy when conducted by natural helpers in the ecology. Empirical demonstrations of efficacy by partners not only advance inquiry but also strengthen the partnership relationships in the inquiry process, fortifying hope for next steps and ultimately for real change.

The last step in this process is the litmus test of the researcher's responsible commitment. This step in the process actualizes going the distance. It recognizes that initial tests of efficacy are not sufficient. Even though they test how real the developed intervention is, they do not ensure that promising interventions will become natural parts of the child and family's ecology. If these effective interventions are not put in place for routine use, how can they truly achieve the desired goal of reducing opportunity gaps and creating sustainable remedies to educational and social inequities? If put in place, these effective interventions provide the opportunity for the partners to commit to a continued process of quality improvements that make iterative adjustments to increase the intervention's efficacy, sustainability, and inclusion. Going the distance ensures that the intervention can be conducted with the existing natural partners using resources that can be cultivated in the child's actual relationship ecology with a sustainable community commitment to improvement.

An example from our Philadelphia research illustrates the value of conducting a trajectory of responsible research that goes the distance (Figure 1.2). The top executive leadership of Philadelphia made the expansion of access to quality preschool opportunities a major priority for change, especially for underserved populations. Our research team helped city leaders build a responsible evidence-based process for expanding access to quality preschool experiences in a transparent, equitable manner (Fantuzzo et al., 2021). This involved building and using a fully functioning IDS to eventually generate a citywide process to identify and close quality preschool deserts—neighborhoods with the highest relative density of preschool children at risk for poor school readiness and the lowest density of existing slots in quality preschool programs. Research using quality administrative data developed an evidence-based, integrated data model of early childhood risk and well-being (Rouse et al., 2011). These data along with Pennsylvania's data from its Quality Rating and Improvement System and community data on open preschool slots in quality preschool programs were used to identify these deserts. Once the research identified all the high-quality preschool deserts, the findings were presented to city leadership charged to use city funds to expand access to preschool children in Philadelphia neighborhoods. This actionable intelligence on the existing supply and demand served to inform the 2017 rollout of new city-funded, high-quality preschool slots. These slots were made possible by the leadership's decision to specifically allocate funds, including a new sweetened-beverage tax, to annually expand high-quality preschool slots.

Furthermore, the city's grantmaking process for expansion intentionally awarded additional points in the proposal review process to those from high-quality preschool providers that were committing to generate new slots or create new centers in high-quality preschool deserts. Also, once provider contracts were awarded, authorized city human services personnel were encouraged to use the desert research database to conduct targeted outreach to families of children with high levels of early risk. Caseworkers working with these families informed them that new high-quality preschool slots in their neighborhoods would be enrolling and offered to support any interested families through the process.

The result of this research partnership was an enrollment pattern that reflected the level of early risk citywide. Children with the relatively highest risk were now proportionally represented among those newly enrolled in high-quality preschool slots, whereas historically their opportunities were disproportionally limited. In addition, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 5 of the 24 desert neighborhoods were no longer high-quality preschool deserts. This process continues, and annually Philadelphia city officials are using the allocated beverage taxes fund and other earmarked funds to create new quality slots. The city officials are also providing to the public annual transparent statistical reports made available online showing how the taxpayer money was spent to create new slots and the demographics indicating who benefited from these new slots. These real data were used to design ready intervention to fit the ecology and promote equity. Research will continue to be used to refine and improve citywide expansion interventions with all the partners around the diamond to ensure responsible research that goes the distance and sustains a process of continued quality improvement to increase access, quality, and accountability of services.

This example and others represented by the authors in this volume demonstrate that these three Rs are not just a declaration of a onetime discovery of "fact" to be lauded in a journal publication or at research conferences. They are the fulfillment of a commitment to pursue real, ready, and responsible change to close opportunity gaps and *Go the Distance* for the children and families we care about and serve. "Going the distance" means the researchers assume the responsibility of grappling with a vexing social problem until some measurable and sustainable changes are made clear and in the places that will justly benefit children and their families. Responsible ensures that the research represents a commitment actualized by a process to engage with partners over the long term to fulfill the promise of the research and offer authentic hope for children, families, and all the research partners.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this introductory chapter was to provide a framework to introduce the distinctive and common features of the applied research presented in this volume. Basic questions of inquiry were used to surface

these shared distinctions. Who and Why were presented first because they reflect the importance for researchers to put first and foremost these efforts to understand the realities of their research participants. This is especially critical for our prioritized group of participants who have been historically underserved and marginalized. Without this prioritization researchers will be telling their participants' story without authentically knowing them. This is a fatal flaw for any research approach. The wisdom of putting the Who and Why first is that then all applied research emanates from genuine relationships and commitments to keep the child's need at the center of all research activities.

This truth leads us to the shared What of our inquiry, which is a shared conceptual framework that maps out essential multilevel, child-centered relationships in the child ecology that serve to advance child development and equity. This framework emphasizes essential competencies that help 1) young children *engage* with teachers and peers in their learning community; 2) families *engage* across racial and sociocultural divides to form relationships with their child's teacher and other helpers who directly serve their child; and 3) education leaders *engage* with other relevant bureaucracy leaders in the community to coordinate and collaborate to meet the needs of the whole child and family.

Finally, the How, When, and Where distinction of our shared research approach reflects a set of standards and processes designed to be real, ready, and responsible for our children and families. They involve the development and use of measures and methods that are real for them with evidence of validity. This real evidence guides the development of interventions designed and implemented for and with them to realistically fit their realities. And, most important, to actualize our commitments and promises to the children and families served by being responsible to them to go the distance by looking to put in place with local partners iterative efforts to continuously improve the quality of the intervention's benefits for the children, their families, and their helpers.

Collectively, these distinctions reflect our interrogation of traditional research approaches that have been applied from the original Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966) to the present to achieve equality of educational opportunity for African American and Latine children and children from low-income households. These are the groups of children who were first documented in this report to evidence sizable academic achievement gaps when compared with their White peers. Unfortunately, after over 60 years of applying these traditional approaches and billions of dollars spent to conduct studies to drive school reform, these gaps still exist at comparable or in some cases greater magnitudes. Similar to the 1960s and the Civil Rights movement—which prompted the Coleman study and educational reform research—we are at another national moment of social awakening of injustice and inequities. Movements like Black Lives Matter and the hardships unequally suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic once again awakened us to injustice and inequities, and again call us to change and

reform our research, practice, and policy to better serve these children and families. The applied research community is called to reset, refocus, and consider promising alternative approaches to inquiry—ones that offer more hope for justice and equality of educational opportunities. What is needed now are research approaches centered on our Who and Why population of children and families, focused on building strategic relationships, and committed to going the distance to actually close any gaps. It is our sincere hope that as you read these chapters and commentaries across the three sections of this book, you will recognize both the individual contributions of the authors and our collective contribution to provide a hopeful research alternative for change that truly speaks to the needs of this moment!

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· Developing culturally and linguistically valid tools for measuring social-emotional development
· Creating more culturally inclusive preschool classrooms and practices
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