



# PLACING EQUITY CONCERNS *at the center of* KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

A PAPER PREPARED BY



**Center for the  
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## ABOUT CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

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# INTRODUCTION

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We are at a pivotal time in efforts to improve the health, education, and well-being of children, youth, and families in the United States. There is increasing recognition that population-level results cannot be achieved without closing persistent equity gaps—gaps defined by race, class, income, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, and urban/rural geography—that are severe and changing slowly, if at all. Further, we know equity gaps won't close without recognizing and acting on the fact that people of color are too often trapped in multi-generational poverty and in neighborhoods with tough living conditions because of structural factors that stretch far back in our nation's history, including genocide, enslavement, institutional racism, and a history of social exclusion.

The encouraging news is that leaders in philanthropy, in government, and within many communities are implementing strategies to address health disparities, reduce poverty and boost incomes, create effective schools, and transform tough neighborhoods—all to achieve better, more equitable outcomes. These complex initiatives usually involve transforming public systems or revitalizing communities or both. In our view, **they require equally transformative approaches to generating and applying knowledge and evidence.** Such approaches require the following elements:<sup>1</sup>

- Ensuring that those most affected by change—community residents, those involved with public systems, others—participate in generating and applying evidence.

- Using all available sources of credible knowledge to understand the problem to be solved, the context within which it is to be addressed, and to design the solution.
- Maintaining a steadfast focus on results.
- Deploying multiple methods of evaluation to gauge the progress of complex initiatives, which often involve policy and systems change and shifts in dominant cultural narratives over many years.
- Harvesting learning and evidence from on-going innovation in ways that promote continuous improvement and adaptation of what has worked in the past.

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**We need to lift up, learn from, refine, and invest in generating and applying knowledge and evidence to proactively contribute to and accelerate the achievement of more equitable outcomes.**

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In this paper, we turn our attention to considering these elements in light of what it means to “place equity concerns at the center” of improving outcomes for those who are the most marginalized. Our premise is that how evidence is generated and applied—i.e., the assumptions made and methods chosen for this task—can affect how rapidly we'll learn and how effectively we'll make progress in achieving more equitable outcomes.<sup>2</sup> We need to lift up, learn from, refine, and invest in generating and applying knowledge and evidence to proactively contribute to and accelerate the achievement of more equitable outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Schorr, Lisbeth and Frank Farrow. “An Evidence Framework to Improve Results.” Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2014. Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/Ofc1/02cb2966e2959ebdc691c2936565cd6d3e99.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Bryk, Anthony. “Redressing Inequities: An Aspiration in Search of a Method.” Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, April 2017. Available at: <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/resources/publications/redressing-inequities-an-aspiration-in-search-of-a-method/>.

# PUTTING EQUITY *at the* CENTER

What does it mean to put equity at the center of evidence development and use? It means that equity is not a by-product but an essential element—a value—of thoughtfully considered intervention design, learning agendas, and applied data collection and evaluation and research. This means that inequities and disparities are the problems to be solved, not simply documented. Anthony Bryk and his colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching advocate for “new ways of thinking about and acting on educational inequities...by explicitly focusing on disparities as the problem to be solved...investigating the root causes...in the lived experience of all involved...exploring how...our work may act to sustain the disparities that trouble us so greatly.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in another hemisphere, the New Zealand Ministry of Education has focused the use of evidence over the past two decades to support “educational improvement in valued outcomes for diverse (all) learners with a priority for accelerated improvement for learners who have been underserved in their education or disadvantaged.”<sup>4</sup>

Philanthropic leaders as well as evaluators and researchers are giving increasing attention to making equity central to evaluation. In 2011, the American Evaluation Association (AEA) issued a statement on cultural competence in evaluation that urged development and implementation of evaluations in a context

of social inclusion and equity.<sup>5</sup> While this is an important step, more will be needed: “inclusion” does not in itself mean change to the systems of power and privilege that too often influence decisions about evidence generation and use. It also does not mean examining underlying assumptions in the methods and orthodoxies traditionally applied in evaluations and research. In efforts to push the concept of equity in evaluation further, some Native American researchers have focused on designing an indigenous evaluation framework<sup>6</sup> and others have been refining participatory research methods as steps to ensure that people most affected by interventions are part of research design and implementation. Most recently, several foundations are supporting use of “Equitable Evaluation,” a framework that integrates cultural competence and equity.<sup>7</sup>

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**“Ethnic and cultural minority communities are too often left behind in efforts to build evidence to inform effective interventions.”**

— *Nancy Rumbaugh Whitesell, Center for American Indian and Alaska Native Health*  
OPRE Report #2017-76

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These and other changes acknowledge that there is a serious “evidence gap”.<sup>8</sup> We simply do not have sufficient, credible evidence about what works and why for different populations.

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3 Ibid.

4 Alton-Lee, Adrienne. “The Use of Evidence to Improve Education and Serve the Public Good.” American Educational Research Association April 2012. Available at: <https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/S1479-368720150000022017>.

5 Dean-Coffey, Jara et al. “Raising the Bar—Integrating Cultural Competence and Equity: Equitable Evaluation.” *The Foundation Review* 6: no. 2, 2014. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1203>.

6 La France, Joan and Richard Nichols. “Reframing Evaluation: Defining an Indigenous Evaluation Framework.” *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* 23, no 2, pp. 13-31, 2010. Available at: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ935344>.

7 Luminare Group et al. “Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper Equitable Evaluation Project, 2017.” Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RBWoWVduM-vh4S68qdmPLN3WPEyPWQwOS/view>.

<sup>8</sup> Whitesell, Nancy Rumbaugh. “Evidence and equity: Challenges for research design.” Colorado School of Public Health, 2017. Available at: [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/whitesell\\_opre\\_brief\\_clean\\_508.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/whitesell_opre_brief_clean_508.pdf).

For example, among “Twenty home visiting models with evidence of effectiveness; only one...has shown effectiveness data specific to cultural groups.”<sup>9</sup> And, as one researcher has noted, “if the trajectory of evidence continues to build for populations easiest to engage and study while continuing to lag for marginalized or hard-to-reach communities, equity gaps are likely to widen.”<sup>10</sup>

**“If you don’t mention my race, you render me mute. And I might then render your analysis insufficient.”**

— *Shiree Teng, Consultant*

An example of an evidence gap exacerbating existing inequity comes from the elementary math classes of New Zealand. Concerned with declining student math scores, the Ministry of Education embarked on a professional development program intended to improve teacher proficiency. It also included grouping students by abilities (or teacher perceived abilities) referred to as “streaming.” The aim was to have all students be “literate and numerate.” Test scores did improve, but not for Maori and Pasifika students. In fact, their scores continued to decline. Out of this disappointing result grew an effort by indigenous New Zealand researchers to design and study a “culturally responsive” teaching model within multi-ability groups.<sup>11</sup> The new approach is showing promise but is also challenging teachers to understand cultural context and apply it in their teaching as well as moving away from streaming which tended to encourage competitiveness in contrast to the “Pasifika notions of the value of collectiveness.”<sup>12</sup>

In short, if we want (1) greater innovation in addressing inequities, and (2) a sturdy body of evidence from both research and experience to guide our efforts to combat inequities, we have to check our assumptions about methods and rigor and adapt our approaches to generating, gathering, and applying evidence, especially as we track progress of community transformation and systems change initiatives. We have the opportunity to do this—and enough examples of where at least pieces of this are being done—that we can indeed put equity at the center of our approach to evidence.

To promote an equitable approach to generating and using knowledge, we believe three essential elements must be included in the knowledge development enterprise:

1. **Valuing and using** the perspectives and knowledge of people most affected by the root causes of inequity and by the proposed solutions.
2. **Understanding and articulating** the structural, systemic, cultural, and historical factors—slavery, systemic oppression, white supremacy, and privilege—that are root causes of inequities.
3. **Focusing on the variations** in impact of interventions—not just “what works” on average, for some individuals, somewhere—to discern what adaptations are needed to reduce disparities.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Hunter, Roberta et al. “Learning by Leading: Dynamic Mentoring to Support Culturally Responsive Mathematical Inquiry Communities Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia, 2016. pp 59-73. Available at: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED572423>.

<sup>12</sup> Bills, Trevor and Roberta Hunter. “The Role of Cultural Capital in Creating Equity for Pasifika Learners in Mathematics” Proceedings of the 38th Conference of the Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia, 2015. pp. 109-116. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED572423.pdf>.

# VALUING *and using the* PERSPECTIVES AND KNOWLEDGE OF PEOPLE MOST AFFECTED BY INTERVENTIONS

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Many researchers and evaluators of ambitious social change efforts, as well as participants in the activities they sponsor, recognize the importance of engaging the people most affected by change strategies to own the strategies and the learning and knowledge development that accompanies them. This conviction is value-based. Principles of fairness, democracy, and justice require voice and agency by those most affected. Beyond being the right thing to do, it is practical and productive. Community ownership produces richer, more reliable findings.<sup>13,14</sup> Conversely, when the lived experience of those most affected by change is invisible to those trying to solve a problem or develop evidence about it, the strategies conceived and the evidence generated are likely to be flawed, and change efforts risk repeating patterns of colonization and evidence extraction.

While recognized conceptually, the practice of assuring that people most affected by interventions are part of design, implementation, and evaluation/evidence development is rarely done, at least in a comprehensive way. Too often, good intentions and good beginnings that involve community residents in all these areas fall by the wayside as decision makers realize what a profound shift is required to share and elevate power of those historically without power.

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“...the key idea remains: as you focus in on trying to address an educational inequity, bring the voices of the people who are most directly impacted into the conversation. Seek to understand the dynamics of disparity through the eyes, mindsets, and emotions of all involved.”

— *Anthony Bryk, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*

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Time and resources are frequently cited barriers to developing the necessary reciprocal trust with community members around everything from defining the questions to be addressed, the data to be collected, the type of findings that will be produced, and how they will be used. But these are barriers of our own making, reflecting what is currently most valued in the worlds of research and evaluation. As Nancy Rumbaugh Whitesell has noted, with regard to community-based participatory research, “Researchers often understandably shy away from doing this kind of research. Academic pressures for publication and promotion are often at odds with community pressures for genuine engagement, local dissemination, and creative thinking about the meaning of evidence.”<sup>15</sup> This is exactly why putting equity at the center of research, evaluation and evidence building is critical. The later we start, the more behind we will be as a field. There is urgency to do this now.

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<sup>13</sup> Luchenski, Serena et al. “What works in inclusion health: overview of effective and interventions for marginalized excluded populations” *The Lancet* 391, no. 10117, January 20, 2018. Available at: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)31959-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)31959-1).

<sup>14</sup> LaFrance, Joan. “Culturally Competent Evaluation in Indian Country.” *New Directions for Evaluation* 2004, No.102, summer 2004. pp. 39-50.

Working directly with the people most affected by research actually enhances research rigor and the validity of findings. It increases the likelihood that findings will be translated into sustainable solutions and practices. To quote Whitesell again, “Close partnerships with communities contribute to rigorous intervention science, beginning with the collaborative identification of the problem to be addressed, through the selection or creation of an intervention, implementation, evaluation, dissemination, and sustainability plans. Sustained partnerships between communities and researchers can improve the relevance of questions, appropriateness of design, and feasibility of implementation and data collection. Together, partners bring state-of-the-art scientific methods and deep knowledge of the local community and culture to prevent problems and promote health equity.”<sup>16</sup>

Evidence gathering aimed at advancing equity is more than including community members on research teams or interacting more directly with the subjects of research or evaluations. Those are important steps as long as they are seen in a broader commitment to share power as part of the research and/or evaluation endeavor. That broader commitment can then be reflected in the ways that research, evaluations, and other knowledge development enterprises are budgeted and staffed, i.e., building in the resources so that participation by people most affected by the research is a fundamental premise.

But while such partnerships are increasingly recognized for their important contributions, it is also clear that existing paradigms for

knowledge development simply do not fit with the requirements of genuine research partnerships. The way research is carried out, funded, and the timeframes associated with it are incompatible with what it takes to generate, discover, and apply the needed evidence from the complex and evolving interventions that are most promising. Also, the predominant research/evaluation conventions often make little sense to those whose lives and communities are the most involved in change strategies. This has to change if we are to use evidence to advance more equitable outcomes.

It is a change that is advocated for by researchers from many nations who are concerned with research conducted in indigenous communities. Examples of this advocacy include:

- In the US, researchers have suggested, “Including community members in data analysis and interpretation may not be a natural process for most researchers. With tribal communities, however, it is important that data be analyzed within the context of the local community.”<sup>17</sup>
- Also in the US, authors of the Indigenous Evaluation Framework (IEF) have noted, “IEF involves a fundamental paradigm shift in which the nature of knowledge itself expands beyond empirical knowledge to include traditional knowledge and revealed knowledge. It redefines culturally bound understandings of “actionable evidence” and privileges place-based, experiential knowledge as valuable to learning and improving both programs and the broader communities of which they are a part.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Whitesell, Nancy Rumbaugh. “Evidence and equity: Challenges for research design.” Colorado School of Public Health, 2017. Available at: [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/whitesell\\_opre\\_brief\\_clean\\_508.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/whitesell_opre_brief_clean_508.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.4.



- In Canada, a Métis tribe researcher has explained “...that the foundation of research is the lived indigenous experience and this must ground the work, not theories or ideas that are brought to bear on this experience. Theories will spring from the people themselves—theories that explain the many facets and connections of our individual and collective lives.”<sup>19</sup>
- South African researchers have noted, “It is incumbent on us as researchers that we do not take community-generated data and wisdom and walk away. Through consultations with participants, culturally relevant processes, resources, and knowledge outcomes can be shared in ways that benefit the community.”<sup>20</sup>

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Responding to these challenges requires evaluators, firms, and academic departments to make seismic shifts in the processes and practices of knowledge development to bring the level of needed balance to these power relationships.

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Changing knowledge development practices in a way that assures the type of partnership described by these international and domestic examples is critical. The toughest issues involved in creating these new partnerships

are often about traditionally white-led and white dominated research efforts sharing or relinquishing power and control to communities. Similar challenges arise around academic-led research efforts. Responding to these challenges requires evaluators, firms, and academic departments to make seismic shifts in the processes and practices of knowledge development to bring the level of needed balance to these power relationships.

Such seismic shifts require a fundamental commitment and value and therefore an emphasis on “sharing information, decision-making, power, resources, and support among members of the partnership.”<sup>21</sup> This means that, “Researchers must be willing to put themselves in the position of becoming the learner, accepting new viewpoints, and giving up their position as the sole expert in the partnership.”<sup>22</sup> However, even this observation still falls short of advancing equity in knowledge development. As long as researchers are paid to “become the learner” but community members are not resourced to be the teachers, power is not fully shared. Both researchers and community members must be adequately resourced and respected so that both can play their dual roles of teaching and learning.

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<sup>17</sup> LaVeaux, Deborah and Suzanne Christopher. “Contextualizing CBPR: Key Principles of CBPR meet the Indigenous research context.” Pimatisiwin, 2006. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2818123/>.

<sup>18</sup> La France, Joan et al. “Culture writes the script: On the centrality of context in indigenous evaluation.” *New Directions for Evaluation* 2012, no. 135, September 2012, pp. 59-74.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp 64.

<sup>20</sup> Keane, Moyra et al. (2017). “Decolonising Methodology: Who Benefits From Indigenous Knowledge Research?” *Educational Research for Social Change* 6no. 1, 2017, pp. 12-24.

<sup>21</sup> LaVeaux, Deborah and Suzanne Christopher. “Contextualizing CBPR: Key Principles of CBPR meet the Indigenous research context.” Pimatisiwin, 2006. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2818123/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

# UNDERSTANDING *the* STRUCTURAL, SYSTEMIC, CULTURAL, *and* HISTORICAL FACTORS *that are* ROOT CAUSES OF INEQUITIES

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Listening to and valuing the lived experience of people who have been marginalized and oppressed begins to bring the structural impediments to equity into focus. Most chronic equity gaps are linked to larger structural factors that change slowly, if at all, in many high poverty communities: historical oppression and on-going discrimination; criminalization of populations of color; and income and wealth gaps that are rooted in historical privilege of white people. Yet, knowledge development has often focused primarily on “down-stream” interventions—those that address individual behaviors and risk factors rather than these persistent structural obstacles.<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, public health research and strategies are increasingly looking “upstream” to better understand the social determinants of health in communities. One study team has noted, “Increasing attention is now being given to policy research focusing on the built environment and the food environment in Latino communities with the assumption that such information would help mitigate ‘top down’ decisions.”<sup>24</sup>

Examining the systemic and structural roots of inequity, while complex, is possible, and the knowledge gained is essential for designing, implementing, and assessing initiatives that strive to achieve equity at the scale needed to be truly transformative. Examples of this kind of evidence building include the following:

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“It starts with...seeing how our educational systems actually create the unsatisfactory outcomes we observe.”

— Anthony Bryk, *Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*

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- **Institutional ethnographic studies produce accounts of how institutional practices result in problematic outcomes for children, youth, and families.**<sup>25</sup> In conducting an Institutional Analysis to generate information and evidence for addressing disparities in outcomes for children of color involved in child welfare, CSSP has found that “Youth of color are too often placed in communities that are distant from providers offering required services, visitation sites, and court hearings. Historical inequities in transportation patterns and how buses are routed through communities can disparately affect the ability of youth of color and their families to travel to and participate in visitation and other mandated services in a timely manner. Sometimes child welfare systems mandate that youth attend programs such as substance abuse, parenting, or domestic violence programs with providers that are not accessible to

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<sup>23</sup> Marmot, Michael. “Inclusion Health: Addressing the Causes of Causes.” *The Lancet* 391, no. 101117, January 20 2018. Pp. 186-188. Available at: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)32848-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)32848-9).

<sup>24</sup> González, E.R. and Villanueva, S. “Communities Creating Healthy Environments to Combat Obesity: Preliminary Evaluation Findings from Two Case Studies.” *Californian Journal of Health Promotion* 10, Special Issue: Health Disparities in Latino Communities, 88-98, p 87

<sup>25</sup> Weber, Kristen and Sarah Morrison. “The Institutional Analysis: Uncovering Pathways to Improving Public Systems and Interventions for Children and Families.” *The Center for the Study of Social Policy*, 2015. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/ia-methodology-web/>.

communities of color or not culturally relevant. Often these services fail to address the underlying trauma experienced by youth of color and do not support them in the healthy development of their racial/ethnic identity. Systems of accountability rarely look at questions of service accessibility and cultural relevance.”<sup>26</sup>

- **Measures of such intangible forces as who holds power, and how it is wielded, are being developed.**<sup>27</sup>

Researchers at the University of Southern California evaluating efforts of The California Endowment have noted, “Policy successes should be measured not only in terms of what policies are proposed, but also how different types of power have been built. This includes how the community’s understanding of issues or structures has deepened, how leadership has been nurtured, and how community involvement has grown.”<sup>28</sup>

Some change initiatives recognize these broader structural forces and deploy strategies to affect these forces directly or indirectly. For example, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and The California Endowment (TCE)—two foundations advancing health equity—are using approaches based and influenced by a recognition of the social determinants of health framework, a research-based framework that identifies the larger factors that have been shown to affect population health more significantly than the quality

of health care itself or individual behavior.<sup>29</sup> Figure 2 illustrates how a social justice lens rooted in the social determinants influences health outcomes in an RWJF supported initiative, Communities Creating Healthy Environments.

**FIGURE 1**  
**USING A SOCIAL JUSTICE LENS**  
**to IMPROVE HEALTH EQUITY**

*Social justice* refers to the understanding that all people should be treated fairly, have equal access to goods and resources, and have the right to self-determination and cultural expression. This lens prompts program developers to ground their interventions in the particular social justice perspective of the grassroots organization spearheading health promotion.

An organization possessing a place and infrastructure justice perspective...may view a targeted health problem as a consequence of the lack of safe recreational spaces for physical activity. Such a lack may result from limited media, political, or economic attention to the recreational and health needs of community residents. Consequently, health promotion would not prioritize changing residents’ health behaviors but instead emphasize building residents’ sustained power to advocate for equitable allocation of recreational resources (e.g., recreational programming, enforcement, and security in parks) using media, community engagement, and leadership-training interventions. These interventions could complement more traditional health interventions (e.g., exercise prescriptions, health education) and built-environment interventions (e.g., walking trails, playgrounds) to address the community’s immediate and long-term recreational needs.

*Andrew M Subica, Cheryl T. Grills, Jason A. Douglas, and Sandra Villanueva* *Communities of Color Creating Healthy Environments to Combat Childhood Obesity* (2016)

<sup>26</sup> Raimon, Martha and Kristen Weber. “Better Outcomes for Older Youth of Color in Foster Care.” <https://cssp.org/resource/better-outcomes-for-older-youth-of-color-in-foster-care/>

<sup>27</sup> Pastor, Manuel et al. “Transactions, Transformations, Translations: Metrics That Matter for Building, Scaling, and Funding Social Movements” USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, 2011. Available at: [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/transactions\\_transformations\\_translations\\_web.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/transactions_transformations_translations_web.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Pastor, Manuel and Jennifer Ito. “Sustaining People Power.” USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity, 2018. Available at: [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/Sustaining\\_People\\_Power\\_BRIEF\\_FINAL.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/Sustaining_People_Power_BRIEF_FINAL.pdf) p.9.

<sup>29</sup> Braveman, Paula et al. “The Social Determinants of Health: Coming of Age” *Annual Review of Public Health*. 32. 2011, pp 381–98.



## UNDERSTANDING *the* STRUCTURAL, SYSTEMIC, CULTURAL, *and* HISTORICAL FACTORS *that are* ROOT CAUSES OF INEQUITIES

RWJF, TCE, and others have implemented multi-year initiatives that seek to strengthen the ability of communities and their residents to change the social determinants of health as a step toward the long-range goal of improving health outcomes at the population level. These initiatives are not programmatic in nature; they look more fundamentally at issues of community organization, community power, public policy and finance, system structure and practices, and in some cases the dominant cultural narratives that in themselves can shape the social determinants of health. The initiatives then assist communities (in greatly varying ways) to develop the organized capacity to address these forces. In both RWJF's Communities Creating Healthy Environments (CCHE) initiative and TCE's Building Healthy Communities, this has involved strong emphasis on community mobilization and

community organizing and other explicit efforts to build power in communities that have been historically marginalized. The case study below, from the RWJF CCHE initiative illustrates how communities are supported to address structural issues.

Just as the RWJF and TCE sponsored initiatives address root causes directly and over an extended period of time, the evaluations and research on these initiatives must try to document and assess the interrelationships of the initiative's action strategies and the changes in the structural and environmental factors that they seek to address. In the evaluation of TCE's on-going work to advance health equity, which is adopting an equitable evaluation framework, this aim becomes a specific principle of the evaluations and efforts to extract learning now underway and will be a guiding principle for future such efforts.

### A CASE STUDY

#### BUILDING EVIDENCE *in* ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES *of* LATINO CHILDHOOD OBESITY

*(Excerpted from Communities Creating Healthy Environments to Combat Obesity: Preliminary Evaluation Findings from Two Case Studies, E.R. González, S Villanueva, and C Grills, 2012)*

The root causes of obesity among children and youth in Latino communities are well documented. Latinos are less physically active than the general population, with disproportionate numbers living in low-income neighborhoods with environments that make it difficult for families to make healthy choices regarding exercise. These areas have few well equipped, safe parks, or other public open spaces for children to play and be active. Relative to the neighborhoods inhabited by the general U.S. population, these places also have a disproportionate number of fast food outlets and grocery and convenience stores that offer limited affordable and nutritious foods and provide an abundance of high fat and high sugar processed foods.

La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), in Hidalgo County, Texas developed a campaign to address this issue in its community that was supported by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Communities Creating Healthy Environments (CCHE). LUPE's policy focus is to make it easier for residents to burn calories via availability of health promoting environments, such as lighted streets and walking trails.

**A CASE STUDY (CONTINUED)**

**BUILDING EVIDENCE *in* ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES *of* LATINO CHILDHOOD OBESITY**

LUPE's CCHE campaign seeks to channel community development resources to colonias [unincorporated, substandard community developed subdivisions]. LUPE's CCHE policy-change goal is to ensure that there is "equitable allocation of Hidalgo County Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to promote safe and healthy communities and address recreation equity through the creation of parks and implementation of streetlights in the colonias." Their aim is improving the built environment and services across six colonias. This includes access to new, improved, and safer recreational spaces and development infrastructure, as well as access to public works services. In part, these efforts are an attempt to secure resources that the Texas Legislature gave county governments to install street lights; many colonias have yet to receive any street lights.

While there are no obesity data for South Texas, the Texas Department of Health Services consistently reports significantly higher rates of overweight and obese Latino children and adults compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Accordingly, LUPE is researching the allocation and distribution of rural (re) development and public works funding and strategizing how to bridge private and resident resources with county funding in select colonias. It is also developing, strengthening, and sustaining colonia committees to take on policy change. Some colonia committees are focusing on obtaining streetlights and others on creating parks/walking trails. According to LUPE, the lack of streetlights means children cannot safely go out and play and drivers cannot see clearly in the evenings. LUPE members/colonia residents host monthly house meetings where members and general residents learn about and discuss community issues and public policies they feel should be implemented or stopped from implementation in colonias, as well as potential campaigns to achieve either of these objectives. LUPE organizers train residents with popular education and advocacy curriculum.

LUPE was successful. It secured funding from three county commissioners who had committed to installing solar powered streetlights in five colonias and obtained a commitment by a chief administrator to a commissioner for a walking trail in one colonia. The funding stems from a federal grant and amendments to the county budget.

# FOCUSING *on the* VARIATION IN IMPACT OF INTERVENTIONS

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A third essential element in embedding equity principles in knowledge development and use has to do with a different way of focusing on the impacts of interventions—by looking continuously and creatively at the groups for whom interventions are not successful and adapting strategies until success is achieved for all.

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“Wherever you are, do what you can and try to bake it into systems so they can’t change it when you leave.”

— *Jara Dean-Coffey, Luminare Group*

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Too often now, system leaders, community leaders, and funders who are searching for new solutions look to evidence-based programs or best practices that have been shown to have success and are thus held up as the most desirable options for other communities. The strengths of evidence-based programs (EBPs) are that they have been demonstrated to work in some setting, for some populations, in some degree. But that is also their weakness, especially when viewed from an equity perspective: the strong emphasis on fidelity to evidence-based programs can inadvertently place barriers to innovation and adaptation that might help more children succeed.

Initiatives that focus relentlessly on examining the reasons that a given intervention is not working for some people, and then adapt their interventions, often apply a continuous learning and improvement framework.

Instead of holding interventions constant, they intentionally and carefully adapt them to changing and varying needs, problems, and opportunities.<sup>30</sup> The aim is to systematically and frequently examine the causes of the observed variations in impact, collect the perspectives of those most affected, and make “disciplined adaptations” in the interventions to address what is occurring in order to better help each individual succeed.

This commitment to continuing improvement is essential to achieving ever better outcomes, but raises problems for conventional evaluators who have been trained in methods that require keeping interventions constant and unchanged over time. It is our hope that evaluation methods are evolving sufficiently rapidly so that evaluators can support and not undermine adaptation and improvement.

Whichever approach to quality improvement and careful adaptation of strategies is used, several common elements tend to be involved, as summarized by education researchers Jennifer O’Day and Marshall Smith:

“A recent comprehensive review (of approaches to continuous improvement) identified five core features of quality improvement across a variety of approaches:

1. **It is focused on system outcomes** for a defined population of beneficiaries—and on the processes that lead to those results;
2. **It uses variation in performance** (including ‘failure’) as opportunities for learning and improvement;

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<sup>30</sup> Bryk, Anthony. “Redressing Inequities: An Aspiration in Search of a Method.” Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, April 2017. Available at: <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/resources/publications/redressing-inequities-an-aspiration-in-search-of-a-method/>.

3. **It takes a system perspective**, with the understanding that systems are designed to get the results they produce, so if you want to change the results, you have to change the system;
4. **It is evidence-based**, including measurement of not only outcomes but processes (and resources), and this measurement is embedded in the day-to-day work of the system and its participants: and
5. **It involves a specific and coherent methodology** and processes. Some of the more familiar methods include PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycles, 'Six Sigma,' and 'LEAN.'"<sup>31</sup>

Two initiatives illustrate how systems built on the principles of continuous learning and improvement can work. The first, the Community College Pathways initiative (CCP) established by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, tackles the problem of high failure rates among community college students annually assigned to developmental (remedial) math instruction as a pre-requisite to taking college-level courses. Through a network set up across 50 community colleges, leaders at each college test innovations that, when successful, are rapidly shared with other institutions addressing the same challenges. In each case, the driving definition of the problem is to look at the students who are not succeeding, deeply understand why, and modify existing strategies or develop new ones that address the real barriers to their success. The results have been impressive, as documented in several publications.<sup>32</sup>

A second example of applying evidence building to ensure that every individual succeeds can be seen in the Promise Neighborhoods initiative of the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) in Minneapolis. NAZ tracks closely the progress of each of their scholars (NAZ's term for each child and student, from infancy on), and works with the 30+ partners who collaborate on the North Minneapolis "cradle to college pipeline" to continually adapt strategies until success for all is achieved.<sup>33</sup>

Implementing this approach requires careful analysis of the variations being observed and then always asking, on behalf of individuals who are not succeeding, "What would it take for this person to succeed?" and for those who are succeeding, "What is working well here?" "What can we learn from this success?" It also requires equal discipline in using the evidence generated by the analysis to adapt practices, programs, and ultimately systems and policies to not just accommodate but advance the necessary supports and services.

Evidence development around these highly-tailored approaches must focus on understanding and documenting how the process of innovation and adaptation moves forward (since that is a vital part of "what's working"), as well as documenting the combination of programmatic and other supports that help each child, youth, or family succeed.

<sup>31</sup> O'Day, Jennifer A. and Marshall S. Smith. (2016) "Equality and Quality in U.S Education: Systemic Problems, Systemic Solutions." *The Dynamics of Opportunity in America*, September 2016, p. 315.

<sup>32</sup> Lachman, Sherry. "Carnegie Math Pathways: Case Study." Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2016. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/carnegie-math-pathways/>

<sup>33</sup> Aberdin, Shanti. "Northside Achievement Zone: Case Study Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2016. Available at: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Northside-Achievement-Zone.pdf>

# THE *way* FORWARD

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Strategies to advance equity must be accompanied by new ways of generating and using evidence. In this paper, we have highlighted three elements that do not stand alone but are facets of an overall commitment to equity in how evidence is developed and used. By (1) engaging in knowledge development/evidence generation in genuine partnership with those whose lives are most affected, (2) taking into account root causes of inequities and developing sound measures for addressing and tracking their continued influence over equitable outcomes, and (3) focusing on continuous learning and improvement to inform disciplined adaptation of strategies regularly and systematically to address the needs of those for whom they are not yet effective, the process of developing and using evidence can advance the achievement of more equitable outcomes at scale.

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**For these practices to become the norm in knowledge development about complex strategies, however, much has to change.**

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For these practices to become the norm in knowledge development about complex strategies, however, much has to change. The ways in which research and evaluation activities are conceptualized, funded, and positioned within the broader world of social change have to be altered. This will require change for communities, for funders, and for evaluators.

For **communities**, several changes seem essential:

- **Resourcing communities to be partners in evaluation and knowledge development.** We have highlighted methodologies in which the balance of

power is shifted so that community members are co-equals and partners in generating knowledge. Yet their contributions are rarely compensated. For equity in knowledge development at all stages—in design, in conduct, in development of findings—community members' time should be financially supported.

- **Developing community members' capacity to participate in, "own," and lead evaluation activities.** As community members are recognized for the expertise they contribute to knowledge development, they are seen not just as sources of information but as active participants in, and in some cases, leaders of knowledge development. This requires capacity building, however. The skills for observing, documenting, and synthesizing experience can be expanded and honed, and as community participatory methodologies are used more frequently, systematic opportunities for community members to acquire these skills should be created.
- **Broader use of results-based, continuous improvement approaches to learn from and guide complex community initiatives.** The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) example illustrates the power of a rigorous and on-going approach to reviewing data and experience in order to guide change. NAZ's collection, analysis, and use of data are deeply rooted in what parents and community members want to understand about their children's development and educational experience and success. The process



of reflecting on progress, adjusting strategies, and affirming commitment to ambitious goals does not have to be foreign when it is embedded in communities, with leadership roles for community members. These processes cost—but resources used in this way pay off in the results they achieve. As initiatives like NAZ systematically collect, analyze, and use this broader range of data and experience, we expect that increasingly this data and experience will become part of a broader knowledge base that will inform and guide equally complex emerging initiatives.

Advancing equity in the development and use of evidence has implications for **funders** as well:

- **Funders should consider adopting an overall framework that unites the concepts of equity and evaluation and that constitutes a way of viewing the knowledge development enterprise.** The Equity Evaluation Initiative (EEI) is developing and testing such a framework in partnership with a number of philanthropic funders.<sup>34</sup> The developers view the process of using the EEI framework a learning process in its own right, as they believe its full value will be discovered by the foundations and evaluators who are now implementing it and enriching it in theory and practice. Whether using the EEI framework or a variation or alternative to it, incorporating strong and concrete guiding principles that link equity and the generation and use of evidence seems essential.
- **Within an overall equity framework, funders should focus more on understanding and documenting the impact of root causes and systemic and structural racism and oppression, as these are the greatest contributors to why disparities persist.** This recommendation applies not just to the evaluation and evidence-gathering roles of funders, of course, but to the initiatives and strategic approaches they support to address disparities. Both in what is done and what is measured, more attention must be paid to historical forces and underlying causes linked to perpetuating unequal outcomes.
- **Funders must be prepared to share power in the generation and use of evidence.** Leaders in the foundation field are increasingly aware of the need for humility and power-sharing as they enter into relationship with communities, even if there is considerable progress still to be made in translating this awareness into practice. However, the approaches discussed in this paper and advocated in efforts such as EEI require equal humility and power-sharing with community partners in the conduct of research and evaluation. As new approaches take hold, funders must see themselves more as supporters, stewards, and contributors to knowledge development, not as the owners or determiners of knowledge. They are lifting up and adding value to the knowledge gained from experiences that are not ultimately theirs, and this requires a stance of humility, partnership, and a willingness to share power and be aware of their considerable privilege.

<sup>34</sup> Center for Evaluation Innovation, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Luminare Group. "Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper." July 2017. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RBWoWVduMvh4S68qdmPLN3WPEyPWQwOS/view>.

- **Funders may need to reconsider what they regard as the most valuable knowledge.** As understanding grows that the complex, fundamental causes of disparities are only lightly addressed (if at all) by programs and projects, the recognition of the limits of linear, simplified notions of evidence change. The recorded knowledge journey of the Lankelly Chase Foundation in Great Britain captures this view: “People we call ‘learning partners’ (note: not evaluators) attached to the projects we are funding are actually an embodiment of the future we are seeking. They represent a rejection of a paradigm where knowledge is generated to service a machine that wants certainty where certainty is not possible. Instead, they are using knowledge as a reflective tool to help those doing the work to navigate their way. In some cases the organizations we are working with have rejected the machine entirely and will not collect what they consider to be meaningless data. They know it is actually impossible to prove their work has a direct linear effect on any particular outcome of interest to funders or public bodies—they won’t get involved in that dance of deceit. They realize that even having outcomes or targets in place risks skewing the relational, adaptive, human way they work.”<sup>35</sup>

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Shifting the relationship between funder, evaluator, and evaluation participants to be more equitable, and to create evaluative processes that imbue social change agents with data and value their insights which inform their own strategies (and that of the foundation), requires a nonconventional evaluator (compared to the larger field) with specialized training, an explicit values framework, and a different approach to evaluation design and management.

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## EQUITABLE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Finally, the approaches discussed here mean many changes for **evaluators**.

- **Evaluators must be prepared to be advocates not bystanders.** Researchers and evaluators need to stand on the side of communities of color, be vocal advocates that communities need a minimum of ten, if not 25 years or more of deep investment and evaluation and learning to turn the curve on social inequity.
- **Evaluators should draw on the growing body of work and available resources dedicated to increasing the equity of knowledge generation.** These resources include the principles, frameworks, and practices of Community-Based Participatory Research, the Indigenous Evaluation Framework, the principles of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, and the tools found at Racial Equity Tools. This guidance from multiple sources

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<sup>35</sup> “Our Knowledge Journey So Far.” Lankelly Chase, June 21, 2018. Available at: <https://lankellychase.org.uk/our-work/knowledge/learning/>

has a consistent message about how to proceed: authentic partnerships, alignment of design with community values and priorities, and rigorous but flexible methods.

- **Evaluators should adhere to equitable evaluation principles.** The Equitable Evaluation Framework specifies three evaluation principles. Evaluations should:
  - Be in service of/contribute to equity.
  - Result in information that describes effects of strategy on different populations, underlying systemic drivers, and history and cultural context.
  - Designed and implemented with cultural competency, multi-cultural validity, and an orientation toward participant ownership.
- **Evaluators should work with communities and funders to develop standards.** The framers of Equitable Evaluation have noted, “There is not yet a consistent understanding in the field of common standards of practice around what evaluation practice of equity efforts—and equitable evaluation more broadly—should look like.”<sup>36</sup> The US

government and academic institutions have established human subject research protection protocols as an ethical baseline for how individuals are included in research. The communities, researchers, and evaluators need a set of standards around how to engage community members to ensure meaningful participation. These standards can be drawn from and build on the work of that frames the Indigenous Evaluation Framework and should create expectations for empowerment and protection of those most affected by interventions in the evidence enterprise that surrounds them.

- **Evaluators should seek to enhance their skills knowledge of methods.** Evaluation is more than a technical skill. It requires competencies in convening, facilitating, engaging and coaching diverse teams and communities to build evidence that advances equity. Likewise, evaluators should bring an entire menu of methods to evaluation and be flexible in their implementation while maintaining rigor.

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<sup>36</sup> Center for Evaluation Innovation, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Luminare Group. “Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper.” July 2017. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RBWoWVduMvh4S68qdmPLN3WPEyPWQwOS/view>.



# CONCLUSION

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In considering “putting equity at the center,” one point emerges as the most fundamental. The separation often made between the strategies to advance equity and the development and use of knowledge about these activities are not useful. These should not be seen as separate and disconnected tracks. The principles that guide action must guide evidence development as well, for both to be successful. Equity is at the center of both, and it is only as this aim becomes reality that the dual goals—**achieving equity** and **knowing more about how equity can be achieved and sustained**—will be accomplished.