Shaping Equitable Early Childhood Policy

Incorporating Inclusive Community Engagement Frameworks into Expanded Data Strategies

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Introduction

Data collected from across the child care and early education (CCEE) field, both during and prior to COVID-19, have been critical for identifying and scaling public resources to meet the increasing needs of children, families, early educators, and providers. Much of the data collected throughout the global health crisis demonstrated how the pandemic has exacerbated long-standing inequities for communities with low incomes.[1] This has been particularly true for Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), Black, Indigenous, Latinx, immigrant, and other communities of color with low incomes who are subjected to intersecting economic and racial inequities.

> For example, families whose only employment options are jobs paying low wages experience numerous barriers that limit their access to child care, primarily around affordability. However, when these families are Black, Indigenous or people of color (BIPOC) who also earn low wages, they face additional barriers that are solely the result of the history of systemic racism and white supremacy culture in America.[2,3] And although many of these barriers seemingly exist outside of the child care space—such as employment, transportation, housing, health, and economic stability— they are compounded by and directly impact child care affordability, access, and quality in very different ways across communities of color.

While data collection and other data cycle processes are powerful tools used by researchers and policymakers to directly inform key policy decisions, these data processes were created within the same systems, institutions, and structures that have been shaped by the historic and present impacts of white supremacy culture and systemic racism.[4] This means that each component in the data processing cycle—including data planning, collection, analysis, interpretation, contextualization, and dissemination—all collectively and individually reflect and uphold systemic inequities that center on race. Yet, these data processes that deeply impact decision making do not always consider, account for, or contextualize those historic and present impacts. And the people with lived experiences who could inform practices and use data to help tailor resources and supports to meet specific community needs are often disconnected from those processes. Ultimately, this creates siloed data processes and decision making. These silos are devoid of people who possess the knowledge, experiences, and expertise to preemptively identify practical implications of harmful policies as well as identify and provide restorative practices. These practices can address present and historical harms related to which services and supports policymakers choose to fund; how much funding is needed; who has access; and how families can access those supports and services.

Within CCEE, our growing reliance on data to inform policy and shape resources will require equal reliance on informed data practices that center equitable community engagement strategies in addressing long-standing, and presently exacerbated, inequities. Current processes related to the planning, collection, analysis, and contextualization of data — which drive decision making — are

often far removed from equitable community engagement practices and almost exclusively involve researchers, analysts, administrators, and policymakers.

This perpetuates the longstanding gap or disconnect between those who are deeply impacted by

> These processes often rely heavily on quantitative state administrative program data—collected by researchers and policy analysts—derived from community members who already have access to some programs and supports but these methods exclude those who are eligible but do not have access. Even so, administrative data alone do not provide information on how children, families, and providers access programs across state agencies, why they need specific supports, what barriers to access exist, and what additional supports are needed. When researchers seek to incorporate broader qualitative community data into their processes, often they use surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups. However, these qualitative data collection efforts are often organized and managed without community input in the development of questions, outreach strategies, or culturally and linguistically appropriate methods—or in the contextualization of the resulting information. Once completed, the collected information is then taken back to be analyzed and contextualized internally for dissemination to policymakers and administrators.

policy decisions and those with the power to make those decisions. In addition, data are primarily analyzed within the context of a single program, which fails to address how children, families, and providers access resources across state agencies and programs as well as what access looks like across communities of color. Thus, decision makers create policy that falls short of equitably meeting needs across all communities. And this, in turn, amplifies the inequities and harms experienced by communities of color.

Central to closing this disconnect and moving toward a more equitable system are **_equitable community engagement frameworks_** that center and elevate the voices and needs of those who are directly impacted.[5] Researchers must also include these frameworks in qualitative and quantitative data planning, collection, analysis, and interpretation. Doing so will strengthen expanded data strategies to move beyond disaggregating data by incorporating practices that intentionally shift power dynamics to support leadership from within directly impacted communities at each phase of the data process.

> For example, community advocates—directly impacted parents, family members, providers, and early educators who are paid by decision makers and/or researchers for their time and expertise—would help decide what questions are asked; what data would be most helpful in answering those questions; what strategies are best for collecting that data; and from whom to collect these data. These community advocates should also lead conversations around what those data mean and the practical implications of possible solutions.

While researchers and policy analysts need to expand their strategies to move beyond disaggregating data, simply collecting more data is insufficient. Instead, researchers, policy analysts, and administrators must combine these expanded data strategies with an equity-centered community engagement framework. By expanding data strategies to include the following recommendations and centering equitable community engagement frameworks as the core of these strategies, policymakers can have a lasting impact on how states support the range of CCEE needs across communities—and specifically within communities of color.

- Integrating data across state agencies to better understand and meet community needs and create aligned CCEE resources.

- Using data to physically map resources through spatial analyses to gauge and increase equitable access to appropriate resources.

- Making data accessible, usable, and inclusive for practitioners, families, and advocates; not just researchers, administrators, policy analysts, and policymakers.

The health, racial, and economic implications of the global health crisis greatly increased the number of children, families, early educators, and providers who need additional CCEE supports as well as the severity of those needs. To address these exacerbations of long-standing issues around access, affordability, and availability, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in 2020 and 2021, which collectively allocated more than $50 billion in federal CCEE funding across states.[6] Yet, to address increased needs equitably, states must prioritize funding to address the gaps and disconnects in how communities of color are engaged in decision making and the data processes that inform those decisions—both now and beyond COVID-19. Failing to do so will further exacerbate the long-standing harms and inequities inflicted on communities with low incomes and especially communities of color that have low incomes.

Background

The disconnect between those who inform and make policy decisions and those who are directly impacted by those decisions both produces and perpetuates inequitable outcomes in CCEE. Historically, this disconnect has created inequitable outcomes by intentionally creating systemic barriers in the form of laws, policies, and practices that enslaved, excluded, and devalued Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.[7] Black and Indigenous people were intentionally disconnected from the systems, institutions, and supports that were created almost exclusive by and tailored for white people and their collective norms, preferences and standards.[8] Many of these historic barriers, which blocked access to critical supports that could help strengthen economic, educational, health, and social wellbeing in communities of color, continue harming these communities to this day. And these barriers also keep communities of color from equitably participating in the civic engagement and decision making that shape the kinds of programs available, what resources they provide, and how those resources are distributed. Without equitable community engagement that intentionally incorporates the cultural, linguistic, historical, and social diversity across communities to bridge this disconnect, programs, resources, practices, and policies will perpetuate inequities.[9]

Uprooting the systemic impacts of white supremacy culture and racism will require bridging that disconnect and creating space where those who are directly impacted can meaningfully inform and lead decision making and advocacy. The current absence of equity-centered community engagement strategies in data processes has allowed the experiences, perspectives, and norms of the dominant, white, culture to shape the standards, preferences, and requirements for everyone. Essentially, this weaponizes data in the CCEE space by limiting or denying access to supports when individual and community norms, preferences, and needs fall outside of those associated with the dominant culture. Within the CCEE system, data can be weaponized through:

- Deficit language that poorly contextualizes outcomes perpetuating harms rooted in racism and white supremacy culture.

- Reinforcement of inequitable power structures that policymakers, policy analysts, researchers, and administrators uphold when they use data to critique rather than empower families of color with low incomes.

Deficit Language

Deficit language has been pervasive throughout early education research.[10] The use of this language essentially treats children, families, providers, and early educators of color as the problem rather than focusing critiques and analyses on the systemic barriers that lead to lower individual, group, or program outcomes. This creates a cycle where people in the CCEE field use deficit language to describe individual-level outcomes and to justify the reoccurrence of poor outcomes, wholly excluding the systemic factors that historically and presently shape people's lives and which deeply impact the lives of communities of color with low incomes. Therefore,

deficit language allows for inequity to prevail in the CCEE field because systems and institutions—and those who manage them—can continue to exact harm without any accountability.[11]

Deficit language poorly contextualizes outcomes and perpetuates harms rooted in racism and white supremacy culture. And it is the gateway for researchers, policy analysts, and decision makers to weaponize data. For example, if a new policy relies on literacy levels of Pre-K students to shape resources, researchers, policymakers, and administrators should view and analyze outcomes within the context of factors such as home language and access to and availability of community resources—rather than simply identifying deficits among individual groups of children. When this necessary context is excluded, policymakers and administrators could weaponize that data by enacting blanketed supports and resources, learning standards, progress indicators, and teaching methods that poorly attempt to fit every student. Quite often these blanketed supports are not inclusive of the individual needs, circumstances, or historical context of individual communities. Ultimately, this cultivates harmful notions of inferiority or underachievement in children, families, providers, and communities.[12] Instead, researchers should strive to understand young students through the diverse systems that shape their academic, social-emotional, and developmental outcomes, as described by people from directly impacted communities. Without the accurate framing of data from impacted community members, researchers, policy analysts, decision makers, and administrators will continue to weaponize data against marginalized groups, especially communities of color. By intentionally engaging communities in the process of framing and contextualizing data, researchers and policymakers can begin to shift from language that focuses on individual-level outcomes and toward language and frameworks that identify systemic failures and appropriate solutions.

Inequitable Power Structures

The current inequitable power structures within the CCEE system that exclude directly impacted communities of color from decision making is a direct result of weaponized data. Our nation has justified white supremacy through the longstanding history of using data to critique the behaviors and outcomes of individual groups instead of the collective failures of systems and institutions. Most often, this justification manifests as a white savior complex, which suggests that families with low incomes, and specifically those from communities of color, cannot be trusted with the power or resources to improve conditions within their own communities.[13] Instead, a web of often-disconnected, majority white-led organizations and state agencies accumulate that power and act as the gatekeeper to those resources. This dynamic is easily supported with data that hyper focuses on poor individual-level outcomes and neglects the generational harms caused by white supremacy, racism, and colonialism. When those who are in positions of power weaponizes data in this way, it reinforces the disconnect between impacted communities and policymakers and justifies these inequitable power structures as a necessary strategy to advance progress.

Recommended Equity-Centered Community Engagement Frameworks

Often, communities of color are mislabeled as difficult to reach. This deficit language attempts to place the blame for limited community engagement on communities of color when instead the methods used to engage them are to blame. Many of the community engagement strategies researchers and administrators use are connected to historical misrepresentation by outsiders and systemic marginalization—and were designed for and by disconnected white people. Community engagement frameworks that are centered around equity will reflect the needs, experiences, norms, and perspectives of individual communities. And the frameworks will have specific strategies to achieve equity that may look different across different communities. However, equitable frameworks share some foundational characteristics, including:

- Intentional, consistent trust building or rebuilding;

- Relevant methods that are tailored to incorporate language, culture, communication styles, community history and other factors that shape engagement;

- Direct compensation for the time and expertise of those being engaged as well as other mutual community benefits; and

- Redistributed power dynamics that allow directly impacted people to lead and contribute throughout the data process, meaningfully and consistently.

Trust Building

Building trust is foundational to any community engagement strategy that centers equity.[14] Far too often, trust has been severely eroded between those who have the power to inform and decide policy and those who are deeply impacted by those policies. This is a result of a long, enduring history of systemic racism, structural inequities, and marginalization.[15] The Simon Fraser University J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue developed a set of guiding principles that use trust building as the basis for equitable community engagement in *Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Engagement—A Guide for Practitioners.*[16] Collecting data used to identify policy solutions that remove systemic barriers in CCEE relies on trusting, equitable relationships between directly impacted communities and the researchers, administrators, and policymakers who are not from those communities. Overreliance on program and administrative data—especially when that data comes from programs that are not equitably serving communities of color—is both a direct cause and a consequence of eroded trust.[17] This overreliance perpetuates inequities and pushes aside critical qualitative data that could be used to center equity in tailoring strategies and supports to meet community needs. Building or re-building trust requires clear communication, transparency, acknowledgment of past and present harms, shifting power dynamics, accountability, consistency, dedicated resources, and time.[18]

Tailored Methods

Tailoring methods to incorporate factors that shape appropriate community engagement strategies is critical to creating an inclusive environment for children, families, providers, and early educators. As lead agencies plan and conduct preliminary outreach and community engagement, administrators will likely find helpful guidance in Step 4 of the *Community Engagement Planning Guide* developed by Lidiya Grima and Toolkit Activity 1 from the Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy's toolkit for *Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration*.[19] These resources provide questions to consider around planning and implementation that incorporate how race, ethnicity, and other intersecting demographics shape community needs and experiences, which can help create tailored community engagement strategies.

Direct Compensation

Compensating directly impacted people for their time and expertise in co-creating policies and practices to more equitably distribute resources that have been historically withheld is also foundational to equitable community engagement frameworks and trust building.[20] Just as those who are considered experts based on their academic and professional experience with this work are paid, those who have direct and indirect lived experiences are also experts who deserved to be paid. When community members spend their time providing expertise, it takes time away from their jobs, families, and other responsibilities.

Providing compensation builds trust by acknowledging the value of people's knowledge and time. Compensation can come in the form of cash; gift cards; meals; transportation; child care during meetings; and/or other forms suggested by communities. When planning compensation, researchers and administrators should also think about how receiving it could impact eligibility for other public supports that have a strict income threshold—and if the form of compensation has its own barriers to access (e.g., checks and direct deposit), which require access to a bank account. In addition, researchers and/or administrators should credit communities in publications for their work; provide capacity building and skills training for community organizations; use local vendors in projects and meetings; invest in community building opportunities; and use other strategies that can be identified as mutual community benefits.[21]

Redistributed Power Structures

Equity-centered community engagement requires the shifting of power structures so those who are directly impacted can meaningfully and authentically lead and contribute. The Greenlining Institute's *Making Racial Equity Real in Research* looks closely at these power dynamics and how they shape interactions and challenges between institutions, researchers, and community partners in developing equity-centered policy.[22] This resource, which can be applied broadly, is directly connected to the power structures within CCEE. For instance, it is relevant where communities of color, communities with low income, and those who exist at these intersections are underrepresented in decision-making. And yet, these populations are overrepresented in the programs and services that are ruled by those decisions. This creates a dynamic where families,

providers, and early educators who are directly impacted have limited power to effectively meet their needs by informing the strategies, programs, and supports that deeply impact their lives.

In developing equitable community engagement strategies, administrators and researchers must note the current spaces where communities already engage. Often, engaging communities is described as inviting people to the table. However, researchers and administrators often overlook the tables, spaces, organizations, and activities where communities already collectively engage around CCEE issues. And because researchers overlook these spaces, they may seek to recreate them. An alternative and more equitable method would be reaching out and establishing relationships within existing structures to provide additional support and resources and tap into the community network. This strategy actively and intentionally seeks to restructure the power dynamics by recognizing the work that communities are already doing. These structures will look different across communities but can include playgroups, community centers, cultural centers/organizations, sports clubs, religious organizations, and others.

Data Recommendations

Integrating data across state agencies

Integrating and linking data across state agencies is crucial to understanding what public supports children, families, and providers are accessing across state agencies. Administrators can use this information to improve cross-agency communication strategies and eliminate duplicative application components to improve program efficiency. However, agencies can do much more when they combine equitable community engagement with integrated data across state agencies. State agencies—and the CCEE community—benefit from centering equitable community engagement practices. Practices that center equitable community engagement, value community members for their time and expertise and create space for them to lead and inform what data are collected, how the data are used, and the cultural, linguistic, historical, and other community context that exist. These practices:

- Aid in identifying existing programs, services, and supports across state agencies and how they are directly or indirectly meeting community CCEE needs.

- Inform how children, families, and providers access these supports within and across programs and agencies; identify the gaps, barriers, and unnecessarily duplicative burdensome processes in accessing supports; and explain how race/ethnicity and other intersecting demographics impact this access.

- Detail how and through what methods these programs, services, and supports can be better aligned to expand equitable access.

- Promote policy making that tailors CCEE supports by using information that incorporates longitudinal data (or data collected over time) to understand who has access to what

supports and how that access (or lack thereof) has impacted long-term outcomes.

The federal Institute of Education Sciences developed an Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems Toolkit that uses a general and self-assessment guide to address the following components, identify key indicators, and strategies to address the following components and identify related key indicators, as well as guidance in developing integrated state longitudinal data systems (SLDS) based on those assessments:[23,24]

- Purpose and vision

- Planning and management

- Stakeholder engagement

- Data governance

- System design

- Data use

- Sustainability

The Children's Defense Fund Minnesota's report *Evaluating Early Childhood Program Access* provides a state example of how policymakers and administrators can inform their decisions using integrated state longitudinal systems.[25] It also includes recommendations for increasing access to and investment in integrated longitudinal early childhood data systems and expanding access to CCEE programs, along with program-specific recommendations.

Child Trends' Early Childhood Data Collaborative, *2018 State of State Early Childhood Data Systems*, highlights the development of integrated state data systems to create a more comprehensive view of CCEE access, supply, quality, workforce, and other characteristics.[26] In addition, it provides action steps for policymakers to advocate for comprehensive, integrated early childhood data systems. Using a national survey, this brief compiles information on state capacity to:

- Link child-level data to assess access to CCEE services, early health interventions, social services, and children's school readiness

- Link program site-level data to assess workforce investments, supply, and characteristics

- Link workforce-level data

- Govern early childhood data sharing

- Use coordinated early childhood data

Administrators and researchers can use two resources jointly to support integrated and linked data systems that center racial equity in CCEE: The Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy's (AISP) *Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration* toolkit and the *Integration of Early Childhood Data* report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED).[27] While the AISP toolkit includes some early education examples, it primarily focuses on how and why racial equity should be centered in linking and integrating data across state agencies. In addition, this toolkit includes approaches and questions for processes in each stage of the data life cycle; comprehensive activities; and state and community examples. The AISP toolkit's focus on racial equity in data integration can be applied to the CCEE specific data integration strategies identified in *The Integration of Early Childhood Data* report from HHS. The racial equity principles detailed in each step of the data life cycle in the AISP toolkit can be applied to the CCEE integrated data strategies in the HHS report to strengthen and center racial equity in data integration in those strategies.

Equity Mapping: using data to physically map resources and supports through spatial analyses to gauge equity in access to appropriate resources

Using data to physically map resources and supports through spatial analyses, or equity mapping—when combined with integrated data across state agencies and equitable community engagement strategies—can provide a more comprehensive picture of accessibility that visualizes:

- How inequities rooted in past and present racist location-based policies have created generational economic and social disadvantages within communities.[28]

- Current resources for children and families and how the physical location of those resources impacts access.

- Where tailored programs and resources can be strategically placed within communities to increase access.

- The availability of providers and their level of access to various resources and programs.

- How the gaps in resources and programs impact social, developmental, economic, and other well-being.

The information collected through equity mapping will also require further disaggregation of data that uses intersections of demographics. For example, intersected disaggregated data could help identify where there is a need for a program that assists children who have suspected or identified disabilities within a community that has a high population of families with low incomes—and that also has a large population of English language learners. Using data this way on a physical map can begin to identify the need for specialized programs that fit the specific

needs of the children and families within a particular community.

> When selecting what data to use, it is best to be as specific as possible in the equity mapping process. State, county, and district level mapping and demographic data are useful for creating a foundational understanding of what supports exist within communities. However, to truly understand a community's access to resources and supports it is important to identify the boundaries of a community –i.e., where one community ends and another begins – based on housing, transportation, and other factors described by community members, whenever possible. This will help identify accessibility gaps within districts and counties by creating a visual representation of where access varies across these geographic territories.

This report from the Washington State Department of Early Learning, *Racial Equity Initiative Data Report*, can be helpful in supporting the process of combining equity mapping with integrated data.[29] It provides an example of conducting a data inventory to identify 1) existing capacity to collect data related to race, ethnicity, and language across systems and service delivery types; 2) the workforce including trainers, coaches, data collectors, and providers; 3) outcomes, progress, and evaluation reports; and 4) children and families who need child care. This resource also addresses how to use integrated workforce data with child and family demographic data to investigate how well connected those providing services, training, and coaching are with those who are receiving them.

Two other helpful resources that contain tools for incorporating equity mapping as an expanded data strategy are:

- AISP's toolkit for *Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration*, which includes the two interactive data mapping tools from DataWorks NC (Neighborhood Compass) and the Asheville, NC Office of Equity & Inclusion (Mapping Equity in Asheville).[30]

- The *Integration of Early Childhood Data* report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED), that details the online mapping tool from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), which was designed to build state and local capacity to feed children during summer months.[31]

The interactive equity mapping tools described in the AISP toolkit use community engagement and integrated data to create maps that visualize the historical and present policies that impact access and availability to supports based on race, ethnicity, and other demographic factors. Although a federal level tool, The FNS online mapping tools were created to help state and local agencies identify areas of need and gaps in programs; show how those gaps can be filled with sponsors, state agencies, and vendors; and act as a resource locator that works on smart phones, tablets, computers, and other mobile devices for children and families.

Unlike the resources above that are not directly connected to CCEE and may require some reimaging to fit in this field, *Incorporating Spatial Analyses into Early Care and Education Research* is specific to CCEE.[32] This dynamic resource, a joint research brief from Child Trends and the federal Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation includes:

- Common uses for spatial analyses in CCEE research and provides examples from Illinois, New York, Minnesota, and a research project that uses data from Ohio and Massachusetts.

- Possible challenges and pitfalls for these types of analyses including data availability, accuracy, privacy, and data interpretation.

- Helpful tips and strategies for success related to the types of data sets used; creating variables; identifying patterns and associations; making findings accessible; stakeholder involvement; what experts are best to include; defining appropriate geographic areas; and much more.

Researchers must combine equity mapping with equitable community engagement and integrated data systems. This allows for the inclusion of historical, cultural, and social context; a comprehensive view of supports across programs and agencies; and an understanding of how housing, transportation, and place-based resources impact access geographically. In the absence of these multitiered strategies, these data will lack the appropriate context and can perpetuate harm by using deficit language, developing bias measures, and reinforcing disconnects between those who drive CCEE policy and those who are directly impacted.

Making data accessible, usable, and inclusive for practitioners, families, and advocates; not just researchers, policy analysts, and policymakers

The process of making data accessible, usable, and inclusive for practitioners, families, and advocates both relies on and supports the incorporation of equitable community engagement frameworks. It relies on those frameworks to truly incorporate how directly impacted communities define what accessible and inclusive data look like and supports them by using those definitions to shape data access and use for all communities. Researchers and administrators must include community stakeholders in the data process, beginning with the planning stage, to ensure data are accessible for, useful to, and inclusive of impacted communities—and particularly communities of color.[33] When plans to collect, analyze, and synthesize data are made almost exclusively by researchers, policy analysts, and policymakers who are disconnected from impacted communities, the resulting data will always reflect that disconnect throughout every stage of the data process.

Once the data planning and resulting processes are shaped by equitable and inclusive community engagement frameworks, the end results must be accessible and useful. Data cannot be useful if it is not accessible. If data are not inclusive, they are not accessible or useful to all

audiences. And due to underlying systemic racism, those most impacted are often BIPOC. Therefore, equitable data often coalesces accessibility, inclusivity, and usability—blurring the lines between each. Incorporating this idea into the data process can be vital in making sure that those who are directly impacted and in need of supports have access to information being used to shape those supports. While accessibility, usability, and inclusion share overlapping characteristics, policymakers face some clear distinctions in how they can use each to recognize and address systemic inequities around race and ethnicity in data practices:[34]

- Accessibility: informs the limitations on how people acquire data—technological access— and how people interact with data and technology—inclusive access.

- Inclusion: addresses how race and/or ethnicity intersects with income, education, language, disability status, and other factors that affect how communities experience and interact with the CCEE system.

- Usability: is the intersection of accessibility and inclusion, where meeting both criteria creates practical data resources regardless of race and/or ethnicity and other intersecting identities or factors.

To increase equity, and by extension accessibility and inclusivity, the content of data reports should be translated into the languages that best fit the context of the community that is receiving it. Whether data is being received by policymakers, participants in the data collection process, or any other groups, the medium in which the data are being shared should convey the same information through the appropriate language and context that is relative to each individual community. Through engagement between researchers and the community, researchers should make decisions around common language, sources, and methods for reporting on social or community-based indicators based on community input.[35] Because language is always evolving, researchers should continuously engage with the current lexicon of communities and ensure that the experiences and identities of those affected by the data are inclusively and accurately reflected.[36] Any content from the data process for the public should avoid wording that may be more fitting for internal program staff and academic audiences.[37] One resource to help with this is the *Checklist for Plain Text.*[38] Creators of external reports should use person-centered language that puts people before another identifier—e.g., "people with disabilities" and not "disabled people."[39] These practices help address deficit language and make the data more useful and representative of impacted groups. For further information, the *Equitable Research Communication Guidelines* from Child Trends provides five helpful guidelines for communicating research findings equitably.[40]

When it comes to data visualization, the use of color is important because some colors have more positive generalizations than others.[41] For example, in Tacoma, WA, researchers used red—often associated with "bad" outcomes—instead of green in their Equity Index to map increased access to opportunities and identify the location of largely white communities.[42] This was an easy way to confront the perception that certain communities are "good" and others are "bad." The use of

certain colors can perpetuate gender or racial stereotypes as well. For instance, the Urban Institute does not use color palettes like pink and blue to indicate women and men. [43] Further, if the content is designed with colors, graphic designers should use palettes that are suited for color blindness, such as grayscale, as an available option to ensure equitable access. The use of icons or imagery also provides an opportunity to increase equity. For additional information about how to embed a racial equity framework into data visualization, the Urban Institute's *Applying Racial Equity Awareness in Data Visualization* is a comprehensive resource that can support this work.[44]

Additionally, researchers and those involved in designing and developing reports should examine the language and order of labels on visualizations. For example, if labels repeatedly start with "white," this may indicate a hierarchy where all other groups are compared to the white group(s).[45] This hierarchy is a common by-product of deficit language where one group, typically white people, or white males, are the default to which others are compared. The use of deficit language in this manner insinuates that everyone outside of the indicated or first labeled group is not the "norm". Therefore, no matter the medium in which data are being presented, it is crucial to be intentional with language and order of labels to ensure that comparisons and hierarchies are not being created or sustained. Researchers should also consider what racial and ethnic groups are missing. Many charts only list AAPI, Black, Latinx, and white, but do not always include other groups that exist within these racial/ethnic categories. When possible, data should be disaggregated by ethnic and cultural groups that are generally overlooked in research because they are consolidated under much broader groupings. For example, the AAPI racial grouping consolidates dozens of cultural, ethnic, and regional subgroups with differing languages, cultural values, norms, and experiences. Automatically consolidating ethnic groups in data—when sample sizes are large enough to further disaggregate—makes it easy to overlook specific inequities that differ within groups as well as across all groups.[46] Using equitable community engagement, researchers should seek to identify which racial, ethnic, linguistic, and/or cultural groups are lacking representation and how equitable representation is defined according to values, preferences, and norms established by those individual groups.

When planning the dissemination of research products, researchers should be mindful of what mediums they use to communicate information and what messaging is associated with that information. For instance, people with low incomes may have limited or no access to email, internet, or a computer. When sharing data, researchers should consider these limitations and determine what offline options to use for publishing their work. For instance, online access can create barriers for many due to paywalls, access through an email address, or affiliation with specific organizations that are designed to protect privacy but does so in a way that severely limits access to information for some. In addition, researchers—and those involved in the data planning and dissemination— should consider what kinds of platforms and devices are being used to access data. For example, reports, dashboards, infographics, websites, and other online resources must be formatted differently to be viewed on smart phones, tablets, and other mobile devices instead of laptops and stationary computers. When determining how to best disseminate research products, researchers should use equitable community engagement frameworks to

understand what the most useful and inclusive methods are, so people in every community have access to all public research findings.

In making data accessible, usable, and inclusive, researchers, and those involved throughout the data process cycle must incorporate equitable community engagement frameworks in all steps of the data process. They must also take into account general considerations that overlap needs and norms across communities, as well as specific considerations based on individual community needs that can only be gauged through equitable and inclusive community engagement. By centering directly impacted people and including accessible, usable, and inclusive data, community-engagement frameworks will be helpful tools communities can use to advocate for and shape a system of supports that meets their needs.

Conclusion

Current state-level data processes that identify previous and current resource use, access, and availability to inform policy, are often far removed from equitable community engagement frameworks. This creates additional barriers for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color—who are also overrepresented as communities with low incomes—to shape and inform polices that deeply impact their lives. As states increasingly seek to prioritize funding and target supports to eliminate long-standing and exacerbated inequities in CCEE, equitable community engagement frameworks will be critical tools for policymakers, researchers, and administrators in making decisions about CCEE programs. These frameworks will strengthen efforts to expand data strategies that move beyond disaggregating outcomes. As state and national CCEE agencies and advocacy groups begin developing and implementing external trust building and community engagement strategies they must keep in mind several internal strategies:

- Conducting equity assessments at the individual, team, and organizational level. These internal assessments should gauge the level of knowledge and understanding of how systemic racism, structural inequities, and white supremacy culture historically and presently impact CCEE for children, families, providers, and early educators of color. Theses assessments can gauge the current internal systems and strategies that connect your organization to directly impacted communities of color.[47]

- Hiring and retaining staff who reflect impacted communities and who have the authority to contribute to and lead internal processes throughout the data life cycle.

- Assessing current data governance policies and processes related to privacy, security, ethics, access, and quality to identify current foundational practices upon which to build community stakeholder input to increase equity.

- Conducting an inventory of currently available interagency CCEE data to determine how broadly data are available, who is represented in the data, what communities and information are missing, and what questions can and cannot be answered with it.

The global health crisis laid bare many of the existing inequities in CCEE that deeply impact communities of color. While increased federal COVID-19 investments in CCEE were meant to address immediate needs, doing so without an intentional focus on equity—which accounts for the historical and present impacts of systemic racism—will further exacerbate inequities now and well into the future. Expanding data strategies to include integrated data systems across state agencies and equity mapping will begin to expand our understanding of how various communities use the current CCEE system. However, the system as it is currently used reflects the same systemic racism and white supremacy culture that has caused far-reaching and deeply rooted inequities. Therefore, collecting more data from the same sources and using the same methods to analyze those data will inevitably perpetuate or exacerbate the same inequities.

Researchers and administrators must use equitable community engagement frameworks as the foundation for expanded data strategies. This ensures directly impacted people with the knowledge and expertise to identify harmful practices are present to do so and empowered to provide actionable restorative solutions to address those harms. Yet, much of this work will need to begin with state and federal agencies and advocacy organizations assessing:

- The current level of knowledge and understanding to do this work.

- Existing priorities around funding and staff.

- Current community relationships or the lack thereof, particularly across communities of color.

- The willingness to shift power dynamics and allow directly impacted people to meaningfully contribute and lead.

As we continue to move toward recovery and building back better—and as states and CCEE advocates look to provide more support for children, families, and providers—the CCEE sector will need to be continually focused on how true equity does not mean all communities are treated the same. True equity is when community members can identify the needs, preferences, norms, and perspectives of their individual communities and when researchers, analysts, and policymakers incorporate what is identified when co-creating policy solutions with directly impacted communities.

Recommended Resources

The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement: A Guide to Transformational Change

The Kirwan Institute defines and examines civic engagement and the six principles needed to create equitable and inclusive civic engagement.

Identifying and Disrupting Deficit Thinking

The National Center for Institutional Diversity identifies some common ways deficit thinking shows up in research and provides recommendations on how to disrupt it.

Questioning the Deficit

The Education Trust defines deficit language and how to be more thoughtful with language used.

Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Engagement

The Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue outlines eight principles for the equitable inclusion of diverse voices when creating and implementing public engagement plans. This toolkit provides a principles-based approach to inclusion, equity, and equitable public engagement; defines and provides examples of various levels of community engagement including inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower; and provides questions to ask as well as potential strategies in evaluating projects for inclusion and accessibility.

Community Engagement Planning Guide

The city of Brooklyn Park in Minnesota offers a guide for staff in creating community development plans for City programs.

A Toolkit for Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration

Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP) provides a toolkit to guide the process of centering racial equity and community voices in data integration to combat the role that administrative data plays in structural and institutional racism.

Making Racial Equity Real in Research

The Greenlining Institute makes recommendations for using an anti-racist approach in conducting research.

Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems (ECIDS) Toolkit

The federal Institute of Education Sciences designed this toolkit to help states develop an ECIDS that provides integrated data from multiple agencies to help inform early childhood education, policies, and programs.

SLDS Early Childhood Integrated Data System Guide

The Institute of Education Sciences provides a guide to using an ECIDS in a Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS).

SLDS Early Childhood Integrated Data System Self-Assessment

The Institute of Education Sciences created this self-assessment for states to determine their needs as they integrate data into an ECIDS.

Evaluating Early Childhood Program Access

The Children's Defense Fund Minnesota conducted an analysis of participation data in early childhood programs for children from families with lower incomes, children of color, and American Indian children using data from the Minnesota Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System.

2018 State of State Early Childhood Data Systems

Child Trends distributed a national survey to indicate the capacity of state early childhood data systems to address urgent policy questions regarding early childhood services. This report details the results of the survey and what progress states made between 2013 and 2018 in fully integrating statewide early childhood data systems to answer a range of policy questions.

The Integration of Early Childhood Data

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education wrote this report to help states improve their ability to use existing administrative data from early childhood programs to increase the quality of services for young children and families.

Racial Equity Initiative Data Report 2017

The Washington State Department of Early Learning (DEL) reported data that would help inform the DEL staff in their work.

Durham Neighborhood Compass

The city of Durham, Durham County, and DataWorks NC created this community resource to allow people to track changes in their neighborhoods.

Mapping Racial Equity in Asheville, NC

The city of Asheville built this resource using GIS that collects maps of history, displacement, and neighborhood change.

Incorporating Spatial Analyses into Early Care and Education Research

The federal Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation and Child Trends outline the value of

spatial analysis in understanding patterns and trends in early care and education.

Accessibility, Usability, and Inclusion

The W3C Web Accessibility Initiative provides an in-depth understanding of accessibility, usability, and inclusion.

Equitable Research Communication Guidelines

Child Trends presents five guidelines for communicating research equitably.

Applying Racial Equity Awareness in Data Visualization

The Urban Institute highlights eight ways to increase racial equity in data visualization.

Equity Index

The City of Tacoma, Washington built this interactive visual tool to show the disparities and inequities in the city.

Endnotes

[1] A person or a family with low income is defined here as those whose income is at or below the 200% Federal Poverty Line or 85% State Median Income. However, this is not a comprehensive definition that incorporates the number of ways families and communities experience poverty.

[2] Systemic racism is defined here as "a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with 'whiteness' and disadvantages associated with 'color' to endure and adapt over time. It is a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist."

[3] White supremacy culture is defined here as "a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent. This is done with the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege." Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, 1995, **https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary**.

[4] The data processing cycle consists of the individual steps and stages that are used to collect raw data and turn it into practical information from which inferences can be drawn and observations can be made. Some of these stages include data generation, planning, acquisition/collection, cleaning, coding, storing, management, analysis, visualization, interpretation, contextualization, and dissemination.

[5] Alycia Hardy, *Child Care Coronavirus Recovery Conversations: Equitable Approaches to Elevating Parent Voices*, CLASP, 2020, **https://www.clasp.org/blog/child-care-coronavirus-recovery-conversations-equitable-approaches-elevating-parent-voices**.

[6] Included in the figure for more than $50 billion in child care and early education funding are the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which provided $3.5 billion to CCDBG and $750 million for Head Start; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, which provided $10 billion in CCDBG funding; and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which provided $39 billion in relief and stabilization funding, $1 billion for Head Start, increases in CCDBG mandatory funding, and child-related tax credit improvements.

[7] Shiva Sethi, Christine Johnson-Staub, Katherine Gallagher Robbins, *An Anti-Racist Approach to Supporting Child Care Through COVID-19 and Beyond*, CLASP, 2020, **https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/anti-racist-approach-supporting-child-care-through-covid-19-and-beyond**.

[8] Emma Watson, *Tracing the Roots of Systemic Racism in the US Early Childhood System*, Advancement Project California, 2021, **https://www.advancementprojectca.org/blog/tracing-the-roots-of-systemic-racism-in-the-us-early-childhood-system**.

[9] Kip Holley, *The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement*, Kirwan Institute, 2016, **http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ki-civic-engagement.pdf**.

[10] Deficit language can be defined as the use of words and phrases that identify or associate individual groups as lacking specific qualities or skills which resulted in lower—health, academic, economic, etc. outcomes—instead of focusing on systemic failures such as a lack of access to programs, supports, and resources.

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[12] Ashley Griffin, *Questioning the Deficit*, The Education Trust, 2014, **https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/questioning-deficit/**.

[13] Gary M. Walsh, *Challenging the Hero Narrative: Moving towards Reparational Citizenship Education*, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, **https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/10/2/34/htm**

[14] Nicole Armos, *Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Engagement*, Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, 2020, **https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/dialogue/ImagesAndFiles/ProgramsPage/EDI/BeyondInclusion/Beyond%20Inclusion%20-%20Equity%20in%20Public%20Engagement.pdf**.

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https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2018/02/21/447051/systematic-inequality/.

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