



Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative Report on Centering Racial Equity in Early Childhood Data and Stakeholder Engagement Work

In March of 2019 CounterPart Consulting (CounterPart) was engaged by North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) to serve as racial equity consultant in the NC Statewide Early Childhood B-5 Strategic Plan Support Initiative. It has been a distinct privilege to work with NCECF and the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) as they continue their good work in supporting statewide efforts to strengthen early childhood education for all children and families of NC.

This report covers our work to bring a racial equity lens to three projects within the PDG initiative:

- The Child Development at Kindergarten Entry Data Workgroup (workgroup)
- The Early Childhood Data Advisory Council (Council)
- Gathering stakeholder feedback to the B-5 Strategic Plan

We engaged in this work from March 2019 to December 2019. We worked in partnership with NCECF and with Sara Heinemeier and Kate Irish of Compass Evaluation and Research (Compass) who served as the PDG Project Manager and Facilitator for the data and stakeholder engagement work.

Our work centered on several objectives, including to:

- Bring a racial equity lens to the creation of the workgroup and the Council and ensure the inclusion and amplification of the voices of people of color serving on them.
- Build racial equity capacity among all workgroup and Council members, including learning a common language and a framework for analysis of how race is operating in driving outcomes for young children and families.
- Apply the OpenSource Leadership Strategies (OSLS) racial equity framework to the Council's work of improving the collection and analysis of early childhood data in the state and workgroup's work of discerning how to best track children's development at kindergarten entry at the population level.
- Infuse strategies to build racial equity into the recommendations coming out of the workgroup and Council.
- Use a racial equity lens to influence the outreach, design process and interview protocol for collection of input on the B-5 strategic plan from stakeholders – both parents/caregivers and local service providers.

Early Childhood Data Advisory Council *and* Child Development at Kindergarten Entry Data Workgroup

Forming the Data Workgroups

It is important that current, traditional leaders in the field be involved in these important discussions and decisions on recommendations. We know, however, that this focus often means missing out on the voices of practitioners out in the field, smaller advocacy partners, and those often not thought of when planning groups are formed. CounterPart advised NCECF and Compass on building a racially diverse group of stakeholders for both workgroups that would include leaders from public education, policy research and development, higher education and more. And, explicitly include leaders of color. The diverse composition of the groups encouraged greater complexity in the conversation – in particular challenging established theory with actual lived experience. Including people not typically involved takes some work – in convincing them to participate and supporting them in being away from their typical roles in teaching and otherwise, requesting their input at actual meetings, and amplifying their points and elevating their analysis as primary.

Building Racial Equity Capacity

Working with shared language and tools, having an understanding of shared history and investing intentional time to learn together are crucial for groups to bring a racial equity lens to their work. Members of the workgroup and the Council attended a baseline workshop on the OpenSource Leadership Strategies racial equity framework. The attendees explored group norms that are behaviors that interrupt white dominant norms, shared stories of how they and families have experienced race operating in assessments (see Appendix A), learned the racial equity framework as a tool for analysis and creating structural strategies, and applied the tool to particular issues in order to practice analysis and imagining strategies.

Using the Racial Equity Lens

In each of the four Child Development at Kindergarten Entry Data Workgroup meetings and the two Early Childhood Data Advisory Council meetings, the racial equity framework was used in multiple ways, including:

- Ensuring that the criteria for a population measure includes an explicit racial equity lens, resulting in the following language: *We commit to acknowledging and eliminating systemic inequities and racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and ability disparities in early childhood experiences, opportunities, and outcomes.*
- Reviewing existing screening and assessment tools and bringing the racial equity lens to bear on understanding how the tools consider the effects of structural racism on child development at kindergarten entry.
- Prioritizing recommendations that are explicitly focused on advancing racial equity.

Council and workgroup members were supported to “keep the slippery fish of race on the table” as they discussed and made recommendations around data development and assessments. Guest presenters were asked to address racial equity in their presentations – for example, whether a given assessment had been tested for cultural validity with a variety of populations. In both small and large group conversations, group members interrogated the status quo and asked themselves “how is race

operating here” in order to fully bring to light the impact of implicit bias and structural racism inherent in our current data collection, analysis and use. Members were encouraged to bring to light dominant norms that are often at play in data and assessment conversations – such as the idea that standardizing an assessment eliminates bias and makes it “fair” for all – and interrogate them with a racial equity lens.

Collecting Stakeholder Feedback on the B-5 Strategic Plan

For the stakeholder engagement process, CounterPart brought a racial equity lens to:

- The development of the RFP and selection process for determining which community and family groups were chosen to provide feedback on the B-5 plan.
- The development of the materials (interview template, annotated meeting agenda, focus group process, electronic survey, etc.) used in community meetings to collect feedback from stakeholders.

Ensuring that direct input from parents and community providers is not only collected but amplified to influence the North Carolina B-5 strategic plan is in itself a racial equity interruption. Too often, data is mined from sources who have direct experience only as an exercise to be inclusive, and not to challenge traditional ways of thinking and being.

Bringing a racial equity lens to collection of input from both families and local service providers included:

- Explicitly inviting the input of a wide variety of communities of color, parents and caregivers of children with different abilities, children and families supported by social services, and children and families who speak multiple languages.
- Working to ensure that the RFP was accessible – brief and simple – thus ensuring ease for all organizations, and particularly those who have direct access to the intended audiences but may not have the bandwidth or “readiness” to apply through a complex process.
- Awarding financial resources (in the form of cost reimbursement) and TA support (in the form of a toolkit of materials) to small community-based or family-led organizations to increase their capacity to collect the feedback.
- Providing reimbursement for the time spent by families who participated in meetings, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, or completed surveys, and providing reimbursement for food and child care during meetings or interviews.
- Making meeting and interview materials and protocols simple, straightforward and not time-consuming, and translating all materials into Spanish for accessibility.
- Inviting families and local service providers to prioritize strategies most important to them, note their needs and define barriers to effectively implementing prioritized strategies, and suggest particular action items to effectively move forward.
- Using a relational (instead of transactional) approach, particularly with parent/family caregiver groups, to ensure that it is understood that they hold the wisdom that is most valuable to meet the needs of young children.
- Shaping questions to explore not only the barriers faced by children and families but the strengths that marginalized children and families bring, to challenge traditional ideas about what is “best” for them.

Our Learnings

Throughout the process, we learned much about the importance of applying an explicit, but not exclusive, racial equity lens to the work of creating data recommendations and collecting stakeholder feedback.

First, having a racial equity lens embedded in research methods from the start is important in challenging white dominant ideas about what is data, who are stakeholders, what are strengths and liabilities and more. There is inevitably inherent bias in traditional data collection tools in terms of what is measured and what is normalized. White dominant norms such as worship of the written word, one right way (that is assumed to be universally understood and used), either/or thinking, belief that there is objectivity, and defensiveness,¹ create a wall of resistance to challenging the validity of the accepted traditional science of appropriate child development and the methods to assess those measures. Practitioners' ideas about change can easily be drowned out by researchers and policy people who are attached to their ways of measuring children, many of the tools for which they themselves developed. Voices from the field, on the ground, and from parents of young children, are so important in this work.

Secondly, the fact that leaders in the field are predominantly white creates inevitable difficulties in doing the work of gathering data and amplifying the voices of people of color in real time. Those qualitative data are critical in developing equitable measures that will benefit all children. The workgroup and Council were diverse in terms of gender, race, role and more. It was important to facilitate with a strong racial equity lens to ensure that those voices were heard, attended to and understood.

Finally, using a racial equity lens takes time, and it is important time well spent. In the data work, training people on racial equity, interrogating white dominant norms, and consistently asking how race is at play took more time than it would have taken to make recommendations without acknowledging and questioning those norms. In the stakeholder feedback work, ensuring that a wide variety of groups are invited to participate, creating materials that are culturally appropriate (and translated), and creating processes that allow for many different ways to listen to families (i.e., focus group, interview, survey) took additional time. The results, however, are better, more accurate, and more attuned to the realities that young children and families in our state are experiencing than if our processes had not taken those additional steps.

The learnings noted above are important as we move forward, and we will apply them to future work in this space. In the short term, we are applying them to the work we are doing with another data workgroup – around how to measure children's social-emotional health at the aggregate level – which is working through January 2020.

¹ Okun, Tema. "white supremacy culture," <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/whitesupcul13.pdf>

Outcomes

Positive outcomes resulted from centering racial equity in the work of the Child Outcomes at Kindergarten Entry Data Workgroup, the Early Childhood Data Advisory Council, and the collection of stakeholder feedback on the B-5 strategic plan.

1. A conversation about measurements and assessments that is incorporating the language about race and racism at all is an accomplishment. The power of centering race in these conversations, with important people who hold levers of power in creating tools is valuable.
2. The recommendations were co-created by a more diverse group of stakeholders than we would have had without an explicit racial equity lens. Efforts like this one are slowly changing the make-up of decision-making rooms, and that is fundamental for changing both how decisions are made and what decisions are made.
3. We were pleased to see both the workgroup and the Council decide that the ability to advance racial equity would be a primary criteria for a recommendation to move forward. After being trained and steeped in racial equity theory and the history of race in America, they fully embraced the importance of using the racial equity lens in the process.
4. The final recommendations for both groups (please refer to those final reports) are different and bolder than they would have been without the racial equity lens, and the use of the lens is clear in those recommendations.
5. The racial equity lens ensured that the stakeholder input process was more inclusive of groups and families that represent the breadth of North Carolinians' lived experience, and the resulting stakeholder feedback is more accurate and actionable.

Finally, there are ever more leaders in the field of early childhood development who are building their capacity to center racial equity in their individual institutions. This is a critical ripple effect of the work. We have heard unequivocally that these ripples are coming from the work of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative and these workgroups. The following quote from a partner sums it up:

"I have really enjoyed the process. More importantly, I have begun working very deliberately within my own organization to think about a racial, socioeconomic, abilities, and gender lens when tackling work planning and implementation. For example, in five-year strategic planning, trainee recruitment, engaging potential trainees in pre-training activities to address differences in core competencies, drafting implementation strategies, and more. I have definitely changed my practice."

The more that the ripples happen, the more accepted and natural it will be to ensure that racial equity is centered in *every* process.

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