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Maryland's infant and early childhood mental health consultation equity efforts

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ABSTRACT

Infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC) is a national model with proven positive outcomes for children, teachers and classrooms, as well as effectively addressing racial inequity in preschool suspension and expulsion rates. This paper discusses recent efforts in the Maryland IECMHC program to deeply and systematically address equity and increase consultant capacity to understand and address racial inequity within early childhood settings.

KEYWORDS

Children and youth services; infant and early childhood mental health; equity; mental health or community mental health

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is an evidence-informed intervention to support early social and emotional development and address challenging behaviors in early learning settings (Cohen & Kaufmann, 2005), by providing preventive, multi-level, relationship-based, capacity-building services for young children and their caregivers (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). IECMHC is neither training and technical assistance, nor individual or group therapy (Duran et al., 2009; D. F. Perry et al., 2008; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006), but instead uses a consultative approach designed to advance caregiver capacity to understand and address social and emotional needs of young children in their settings. IECMHC's positive outcomes include improved teacher-rated child behavior and classroom climate, increases in teacher-reported developmentally appropriate knowledge, enhanced teacher-child relationships, increased teacher job satisfaction and reduced stress (Brennan et al., 2008; Conners-Burrow et al., 2013; D.F. Perry et al., 2010; Gilliam, 2007; Gilliam et al., 2016; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006).

IECMHC has been linked with reduced preschool suspension and expulsion rates (D. F. Perry et al., 2008; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Pre-kindergartners are suspended or expelled at rates 3x higher than the K-12 rate (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006) and children in childcare settings at almost 15 times the K-12 rate (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Striking racial disparities exist, with Black boys being suspended/expelled at rates up to four times higher than their white and female counterparts (Gilliam, 2006; Office for Civil rights, 2014). This begins the preschool to prison pipeline that derails the lives of children of color, beginning before Kindergarten and leaving lasting effects. The National Infant and Early Childhood Mental Consultation Center of Excellence has also emphasized addressing racial inequity in early childhood settings through IECMHC and other strategies, by including equity practices in their national competencies (National Center of Excellence on Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health, 2020).

The statewide Maryland IECMHC project, funded by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), operates through 11 programs. MSDE collaborates with the University of Maryland School of Social Work (UMB SSW), Institute for Innovation and Implementation (the Institute), Parent

Infant Early Childhood (PIEC) Team on workforce development, policy, and evaluation efforts. They jointly disseminated new IECMHC standards in 2020, outlining a tiered model in which consultants focus on individual children and families and whole classrooms and programs (Sweeney Wasserman et al., 2020), specifically emphasizing racial inequity.

The Grand Challenge to Eliminate Racism asks scholars and practitioners to focus on the “centrality of racism and white supremacy, both within society and within the profession” (Teasley et al., 2021). In keeping with that charge, we began intentionally planning deepened IECMHC equity work in 2020, focusing on building consultant capacity to confront racism in their work and providing opportunities to reflect on how white supremacy culture infiltrates our own thoughts and behaviors. The intention of this paper is to delineate the racial justice, equity and inclusion activities taking place within the MSDE funded statewide IECMHC programs.

Indigo cultural center’s racism equity transformational/healing framework

In 2020, the PIEC team began a partnership with The Indigo Cultural Center (Indigo), a nationally recognized organization dedicated to addressing racism in the infant mental health field. Indigo has adapted and tested a four-level racial justice framework that is specific to infant mental health (Shivers & Arbel, 2019) broadly and to IECMHC specific. The Indigo Framework is informed by the Healing and Transformational Justice movement (Pyles, 2020) and by Critical Race Theory (Yosso et al., 2009). There are four broad pathways (or levels) for achieving goals related to disrupting systemic racism and moving toward social justice in the context of infant of mental health (See Table 1): Individual/Internal, Inter-group/Interpersonal Institutional/Systemic, and Ideological (Adapted from Potapchuk, 2004). The the levels are not necessarily linear and can unfold organically and simultaneously during a transformational experience (Meehan et al., 2009; Shivers & Arbel, 2019). Each of the IECMHC activities described below incorporates various levels and layers of the Indigo Framework.

IECMHC racial equity retreat, small group facilitators & equity leadership group

Indigo facilitated a 2-afternoon equity retreat in February 2020 for Maryland consultants, program directors, and MSDE and PIEC team representatives. Small Group Facilitators from all groups were recruited, and Indigo hosted two facilitator prep pre-sessions. The Small Group Facilitators led close to 50 participants through several breakout sessions during the retreat. Prior to the retreat, 81% of participants reported that race and equity issues do arise in their work, but only 44% reported a lot or extensive knowledge about equity issues. Only 26% and 19% reported engaging in communication and dialogue about and actively engaging in activities related to race and equity, respectively. The retreat incorporated all four levels of the Indigo Framework.

Table 1. Indigo cultural center’s racial equity transformational/healing framework.

Individual/ Internal	Focuses on building the knowledge, awareness, and skills of individuals to increase cultural and racial awareness, confront prejudices and stereotypes, and address power dynamics, racism, internalized white supremacy, and internalized racism. The use of embodied mindfulness practices is central to addressing the ‘inner work of social justice.’ (Magee, 2019).
Interpersonal/Intergroup/ Relational	Focuses on how we talk with one another about race. This level of transformation brings people of different racial and ethnic identity groups together whereby they co-create agreements and ways of working together in order to dismantle stereotypes, adopt common language, build relationships of trust and solve problems and conflicts. The use of personal and collective narrative is central to this level.
Institutional/Systemic/ Organizational	Focuses on systemic and historical patterns that have contributed to inequities. This level also focuses on strengthening the capacity of organizations and institutions to communicate about race, organize and mobilize for change, and advocate for more inclusive policies and institutional practices that reduce disparities and promote racial equity.
Ideological	Focus at this level includes the regular, ongoing interrogation and adoption of the ever-evolving use of terms, concepts, and frameworks that are central to creating common language and shared understanding of issues and solutions related to racial equity.

Table 2. Small group facilitator coaching objectives.

Build an informal network of peers (facilitate relationships; explore sustainability of the group)
Explore self-discovery – What/who you need to keep your own learning and growth around racial justice moving forward? This includes: Growth for yourself, Growth for your colleagues and consultees, Growth for your program/agency
Learn how to integrate racial equity principles into key IECMHC tenets and frameworks (COE Competencies; Consultative Stance; etc.).
Share and explore the use of specific resources related to racial equity, reflective supervision, and consultation.
Discover how to co-create a “container” for facilitating equity work and racial equity conversations with colleagues in your agency.

Table 3. Key evaluation questions for exploring change and transformation.

How are participants’ self-efficacy as facilitators and levels of self-awareness shifting as a result of participating in the SGF sessions?
To what extent are participants using and sharing equity resources with one another, with other colleagues at their respective organizations, and with their consultees?
How are participants leveraging and/or increasing the opportunities within their respective organizations to facilitate or advocate for racial equity workgroups?
To what extent do participants perceive their own racial equity facilitation activities are shifting practice (i.e., integrating a stronger racial equity lens into consultation) for their colleagues?

Small Group Facilitator Coaching Sessions now occur monthly incorporating all four levels of the Indigo Framework (see [Table 2](#) for coaching session current objectives, and [Table 3](#) for the key guiding evaluation questions). Ultimately, all Maryland IECMHC staff will have access within their organizations to someone who has expertise in facilitating conversations around equity and addressing inequities as they arise. Small-group facilitators practice skills during the monthly statewide IECMHC Facilitated Conversations, Maryland’s IECMHC peer meeting. They lead small-group conversations exploring characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (Jones & Okun, 2001), discussing how the characteristic may show up in the classroom or at work, how it reinforces inequities, and which of the identified antidotes are currently used or will use in the future. In addition, monthly IECMHC Equity Leadership and Planning sessions are help to shape the work. This group explores what systemic-level changes are needed and strategizes how to implement these changes. Although these sessions incorporate elements of all four levels of the Indigo Framework, the focus is on Institutional/Systemic/Organizational.

Pyramid model

The Pyramid Model, a conceptual framework of evidence-based practices for promoting young children’s healthy social and emotional development, focusing on promoting positive behavior and addressing challenging behaviors (University of Denver et al., n.d.), is deeply infused into Maryland IECMHC practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a weekly vlog series launched amplifying Pyramid Model strategies, offering regular supportive messages to caregivers, family members, and the early childhood workforce, and reinforcing the principles of IECMHC and equity (<https://www.mdpyramidmodelsefel.org/blog>). The Maryland Pyramid Model State Leadership Team created an Elevating Equity Subcommittee, which prioritizes equity work within Pyramid Model implementation. They initiated a Pyramid Model Trainer Knowledge, Skill and Attitudes on Equity and Anti-racism survey, and revised the Mission and Vision, developed an Equity Statement (<https://www.mdpyramidmodelsefel.org/mission-vision-and-equity-statements>). We are currently developing a Training Guide to address race and equity to accompany Pyramid Model training content. Additionally, three State Leadership Team members participated in a 4-part equity series hosted by the Pyramid Model Consortium with representatives from 32 Leadership Teams, and subsequently presented the information during the Maryland Pyramid Model State Leadership Team Equity Retreat held in July 2021.

Objectives and evaluation

Developmental Evaluation techniques, an approach that can assist social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments like the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial inequity, are being applied. The Developmental Evaluation approach is iterative and is used to facilitate real-time, or close to real-time, feedback to program staff and leadership facilitating a continuous development loop. This is particularly suited to innovation, radical program re-design, replication, complex issues, crises, etc. (Patton, 2011), and is useful for framing concepts, testing quick iterations, tracking developments, and surfacing issues.

As an example, we invited IECMHC providers, program directors, and funders to participate in interviews and focus groups to gather information about their experiences providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Afkinich et al., 2021), with equity emerging as a prominent theme. Consultants and directors saw internal work as a necessary first step in centering equity. Program directors described implementation strategies within their agencies and programs, including: contacting the Board about drafting a values statement emphasizing equity; changing hiring practices and agency policies to focus on equity; engaging in coaching and training around how to have conversations about race and equity with childcare providers; and exploring ways to specifically outreach providers who primarily serve children of color.

Conclusions

Overall, Maryland is directly addressing the historical and current racial bias and inequity within early childhood settings by engaging the IECMHC workforce in ongoing racial and equity work. This will continue to be an ongoing growth process. As we reemerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and children are entering childcare in greater numbers, approaching this work with a racial equity lens is vitally important to best support our young children. Future activities will include mixed-method evaluation of the impact of these efforts and deeper analyses of the equity within service delivery activities and outcomes. In addition, dissemination efforts will include sharing information and outcomes with other states and national partners such as Center of Excellence for IECMHC.

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