

# Promoting Equitable Practice with Professional Development

Center for Early Education  
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
ceed.umn.edu | ceed@umn.edu

*This tip sheet covers how relationship-based professional development can be used as a tool to promote more equitable practice in work with children and families. It describes how various models of professional development go about promoting change.*

## RECALL IT

A companion tip sheet, ***Introducing It: Relationship-Based Professional Development***, presents these ideas:

- There are four common models of professional development for professionals working with children and families: **reflective supervision/consultation (RSC)**, **infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC)**, **technical assistance (TA)**, and **coaching**. These differ in core activities, goals, and outcomes.
- These four models share several hallmarks of high-quality professional development:
  - Reflection
  - Relationship-based
  - Consistency over time

## PROMOTING EQUITABLE PRACTICES

Research points to inequities in systems that touch the lives of children. For example, in school and in child care, children of color face higher rates of suspension and expulsion. Also, outcomes for children with cognitive or physical disabilities are often less positive. In the child welfare field, there are racial disparities in child removal or separation from parents. This tip sheet will show how professional development (PD) can help people and organizations improve their practices. It will look at how racism shows up at different levels of society. And it will explain how different models of PD can combat racism at those different levels.

**“And every moment of progress that we have had has not been because of the sudden goodwill of any group of people. It has been because people have resisted, because they have pushed for change, like, the pendulum towards justice is not just moving on its own, it’s being pushed. And it’s being pushed by people who are very clear about why this is important.”**

—Kamilah Pickett, Race Matters Institute

Professional development (PD) that addresses inequities can have one or more of the following goals:

- Increasing professionals' awareness of the significance of race and their own racial identity
- Interrupting racialized patterns in practice
- Supporting professionals of color
- Creating an equitable classroom environment
- Promoting positive relationships between the professional and the family or child they are working with, especially when the professional and their client(s) come from different cultures<sup>1</sup>

All of these are intermediate goals, like stepping stones on the path toward equitable outcomes for children. There is not yet enough research available to know how equity-focused PD improves outcomes for children.

## WHAT ADDRESSING INEQUITIES LOOKS LIKE IN PD

### REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION/CONSULTATION

Conversations address equity by focusing on:

- Deepening educators' awareness of their biases
- Taking the perspective of clients
- Questioning one's assumptions

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Reflective supervision/consultation (RSC) can also include practicing mindfulness, body awareness, self-regulation, and social locating (see *Defining It on page 6*). These techniques can be integrated into how we think about race and inter-racial conflict.<sup>2</sup> Organizations that participate in RSC often use the Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children, and Families (see *Diving into It on page 6*).<sup>3</sup>

**“The real integration of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) concepts into practice is self-reflection work, which means that it’s not me [as a DEI or RSC (reflective supervision/consultation) trainer] telling you the “black story”, it’s you as an RSC provider, figuring out why you’re not curious about or able to hear the individual black person’s story when you are in a space with them.”**

—Andrea Penick, Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health

## INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTATION

Educators can learn to change how they relate to children with challenging behaviors. This way, they can promote a better classroom climate. Making this change can include disrupting educators’ implicit bias (see *Defining It on page 6*). Infant and early childhood mental health consultation can help with this in two ways:

- It helps educators understand each child individually
- It supports equitable decision-making around issues such as child discipline referrals

In this way, infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMHC) can help prevent the cascading processes that lead to a child being expelled.<sup>4</sup> One study found that IECMHC helped close the gap between teachers’ level of conflict with white and Black students.<sup>5</sup>

## COMPARING RSC and IECMHC

RSC and IECMHC can address equity issues. But that depends on how much the supervisor or supervisee(s) bring them up in conversation. Thus, these models can have a strong focus on equity, or not address it at all. We don’t yet know how these methods improve outcomes for children and families.

Additionally, these models rely on elements of trust and vulnerability, which again, may differ widely across relationships. Research on RSC has found that a high proportion of supervisors are white, which makes “safety” different for white professionals vs. professionals of color. That can result in different experiences for different racial or ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup>

## COACHING

Professionals can be guided to learn how to translate anti-racism training into their day-to-day work with children. An ongoing relationship with a coach gives professionals an opportunity for reflection and long-term processing. This is what’s needed to make changes in practice.

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

One or more of the following activities can be included to address inequity across a system:

- **Collecting data on outcomes for families and children.** This can help identify and address gaps between demographic groups
- **Reviewing policies and procedures.** This is a first step to understanding how an organization’s policies may privilege certain groups over others. When we know that, we can shift towards more inclusive policies

## CRITICAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Reflective supervision/consultation, infant and early childhood mental health consultation, coaching, and technical assistance were all created for other purposes, but they have been adapted to

## COMPARING COACHING and TA

Some researchers think that coaching and technical assistance (TA) focus too much on professionals' skills or on outcomes like achievement gaps. These critics feel coaching and TA should also examine or change professionals' beliefs. They also argue that these professional development models focus too much on getting professionals to use pre-set best practices. They say that this leaves no room for questioning the overall structures and norms in fields like education.

Research has shown that coaching and TA do impact academic outcomes such as math or literacy. We don't yet know if these methods work to combat racism or oppression. More research is needed.

work on equity issues. Conversely, **critical professional development (CPD)** emerged because critics of traditional professional development models thought they did not meet educators' needs around equity-related issues. Critical professional development is a model of ongoing professional development. Its goals are:

- Challenging the status quo
- Promoting reflection on one's own role in harmful systems
- Encouraging participant-driven change in how professionals engage with their communities

CPD is used in the education field. It emphasizes the potential for educators to promote social justice. CPD sees educators "as politically aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society." It aims to provide them with "the space and structure to develop as liberatory actors."<sup>7</sup>

CPD may include formats like the following:

- Racial affinity groups, which focus on bringing together professionals of similar racial backgrounds

- Teacher inquiry groups. These teacher-led groups provide collective support. They can involve conversations about theory and practice<sup>8</sup>

CPD most often occurs outside of school-based professional development. Community organizations, universities, and nonprofits most often provide it.

**“Racial affinity professional development at its core is about designing spaces of support, learning and healthy career development that are culturally responsive to a specific racialized group who experiences the consequences of institutional racism in particular ways. In the case of BTP [Black Teacher Project], this group is Black teachers, an ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse group, but one that also experiences anti-Blackness in connected ways, and one that may also nurture educational liberation in related pro-Black ways.”**

—Dr. Micia Mosely<sup>9</sup>

## SOCIETAL LEVELS OF RACISM

Different types of professional development can meet different goals. One group of researchers defined four levels of racism within society<sup>10</sup> (see the table on page 4). This framework is useful when matching an organization with the right professional development model. That is because different models target different goals that are aligned with each level of racism.

For example, reflective supervision/consultation and coaching both engage individuals in deep conversations about how they see themselves in their work and about their interactions with the children and families they serve.

These conversations address racism on the internalized and interpersonal levels. On the other hand, technical assistance can address racism on an institutional or systemic level. It can include

## ALIGNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH THE 4 LEVELS OF RACISM

| Level of racism      | Definition (Iruka et al., 2021)  | Professional development targets: What needs to change?   | Interventions: How can we change it?   |
|----------------------|--|---|--|
| <b>Internalized</b>  | Race-based beliefs and feelings within individuals                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognition (e.g., knowledge, beliefs)</li> <li>• Emotion</li> <li>• Physiological responses</li> </ul>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge about the history of racist systems</li> <li>• Understanding of psychological basis of bias</li> <li>• Language and vocabulary to talk about race</li> <li>• Self-awareness, social location (see Defining It on the next page)</li> <li>• Mindfulness, body-based healing, art making</li> </ul>         |
| <b>Interpersonal</b> | Bigotry and biases shown between individuals through words and actions | Interactions between professionals, families, and children (e.g., microaggressions, expectations, conflict, discipline)   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building reflective capacity</li> <li>• Understanding the feelings underneath behaviors</li> <li>• Perspective-taking, considering individuals rather than groups</li> <li>• Intentional curiosity, wondering</li> <li>• Holding a non-judgmental stance</li> <li>• Practice discussing race with others</li> </ul> |
| <b>Institutional</b> | Discriminatory policies and practices within organizations             | Policies and practices regarding professionals (e.g., hiring, leadership, child discipline policies) and families (e.g., equitable access to programs and services) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equity audits of existing policies</li> <li>• Collecting and using disaggregated data</li> <li>• Building sustainable action steps</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Systemic</b>      | Ongoing racial inequalities maintained by society                      | Laws, societal status quo   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy</li> <li>• Collecting and using data at a state or federal level</li> </ul>  |

The definitions in columns one and two were adapted from Iruka, I.U., Harper, K., Lloyd, C.M., Boddicker-Young, P., De Marco, A., & Jarvis, B. (2021). *Anti-racist policymaking to protect, promote, and preserve Black families and babies*. Chapel Hill, NC: Equity Research Action Coalition, Franklin Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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activities like the following:

- Reviewing data about who is served
- Auditing policies around hiring and promotions
- Coaching leadership to think through the systemic impact of their program

## KEY ELEMENTS IN EQUITY-FOCUSED PD

How might professional development lead to changes in practice and, in turn, to more equitable outcomes for children? Along with the recommended practices we discussed in the companion tip sheet, researchers have found several other key elements:

- An intentional focus on discussions of race, power, and privilege
- Discussion of how implicit bias influences decision-making processes
- Integration throughout educators' professional learning experiences (rather than a one-time training event on racism or bias, for example)
- Critical professional development tools, like racial affinity groups to develop and retain racial-equity-oriented professionals
- A sustained focus on equity

It is not enough to increase educators' knowledge about racism or even to change their beliefs. Professional development must also motivate and support educators to change their practices and relationships with students and families. That requires "sustained grappling with anti-racist ideas."<sup>11</sup> It also requires ongoing support for educators.

## REFERENCES

The sources referenced in this tip sheet can be found at [z.umn.edu/equity\\_pd\\_refs](https://z.umn.edu/equity_pd_refs)

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## DEFINING IT

### Implicit bias

The National Equity Project defines implicit bias (or unconscious bias) as: "the process of associating stereotypes or attitudes towards categories of people without conscious awareness—which can result in actions and decisions that are at odds with one's conscious beliefs about fairness and equality. This can lead us to make biased and unfair decisions regarding who we hire for a job or select for a promotion, which classes we place students into and who we send out of the classroom for behavior infractions, and which treatment options we make available to patients."<sup>12</sup>

### Social location

A combination of demographic factors, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, geographic origin, etc. that is unique to each individual. The practice of acknowledging and discussing one's social location and similarities and differences to others is one way to promote self-awareness and reflection on why these characteristics are important in a variety of situations.<sup>13</sup>

## DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic:

Please visit our website: [ceed.umn.edu](https://ceed.umn.edu)

For more on professional development for teachers, see the introduction to "Professional Development for and by Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers" in the *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers*: [z.umn.edu/handbook\\_teachers](https://z.umn.edu/handbook_teachers).

For more on RSC, see *Digging Deeper: De-Colonizing Our Understanding and Practice of Reflective Supervision Through a Racial Equity Lens: First-Wave Findings*: [z.umn.edu/digging\\_deeper](https://z.umn.edu/digging_deeper).