



## **Integrating Equity Principles in Early Childhood Implementation Science: A Framework for Educational Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Persistent inequities in access to and outcomes of early childhood education continue to disadvantage children from marginalized populations, revealing systemic gaps that limit the reach of evidence-based interventions. While established implementation frameworks such as the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment (EPIS), and RE-AIM provide essential structure for translating evidence into practice, they often lack explicit mechanisms to embed equity throughout the implementation process. The Equity-Centered Implementation Framework for Early Years (ECIF-EY) was developed to address this gap by systematically integrating equity principles into implementation science for early childhood education. The framework was developed through a systematic literature review and synthesis of studies published between 2010 and 2025, incorporating insights from implementation science, cultural adaptation theory, and community-based participatory research. Case analyses of early childhood initiatives informed the refinement of five interconnected domains: Contextual Equity Analysis, Stakeholder Engagement and Power Sharing, Cultural Adaptation and Relevance, Equity-Focused Implementation Strategies, and Equity-Oriented Evaluation. Each domain provides measurable indicators and structured guidance to operationalize equity in practice. Two visual models—the conceptual domain structure and process flow diagram—illustrate the framework’s integration of theory and practice. The ECIF-EY offers a comprehensive, evidence-informed model that supports equitable implementation in early learning environments and advances implementation science through a focus on justice-oriented practice.

### **Keywords:**

Cultural Adaptation, Equity, Framework Development, Implementation Science

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**Abstrak**

Ketimpangan yang terus berlanjut dalam hal akses dan hasil pendidikan anak usia dini terus merugikan anak-anak dari kelompok masyarakat yang terpinggirkan, yang mengungkap adanya kesenjangan sistemik yang membatasi jangkauan intervensi berbasis bukti. Meskipun kerangka kerja implementasi yang telah mapan seperti the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment (EPIS), serta RE-AIM memberikan struktur penting untuk menerjemahkan bukti ke dalam praktik, kerangka kerja tersebut sering kali tidak memiliki mekanisme eksplisit untuk menanamkan kesetaraan di seluruh proses implementasi. The Equity-Centered Implementation Framework for Early Years (ECIF-EY) dikembangkan untuk mengatasi kesenjangan ini dengan secara sistematis mengintegrasikan prinsip-prinsip kesetaraan ke dalam ilmu implementasi untuk pendidikan anak usia dini. Kerangka kerja ini dikembangkan melalui tinjauan literatur sistematis dan sintesis studi yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2010 dan 2025, dengan memasukkan wawasan dari ilmu implementasi, teori adaptasi budaya, dan penelitian partisipatif berbasis komunitas. Analisis kasus terhadap inisiatif-inisiatif masa kanak-kanak menjadi dasar penyempurnaan lima domain yang saling terkait: Analisis Keadilan Kontekstual, Keterlibatan Pemangku Kepentingan dan Pembagian Kekuasaan, Adaptasi Budaya dan Relevansi, Strategi Implementasi yang Berfokus pada Keadilan, serta Evaluasi yang Berorientasi pada Keadilan. Setiap domain menyediakan indikator yang dapat diukur dan panduan terstruktur untuk mengoperasionalkan keadilan dalam praktik.

**Kata Kunci:**

Adaptasi Budaya, Kesetaraan, Pengembangan Kerangka Kerja, Ilmu Implementasi

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## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a decisive role in shaping developmental trajectories, academic readiness, and lifelong opportunities for children. Yet despite decades of research confirming its long-term benefits, significant disparities persist in access to and quality of early learning experiences for children from historically marginalized communities (Black et al., 2017). These inequities often reflect the enduring effects of systemic barriers—including structural racism, socioeconomic inequality, and policy fragmentation—that limit equitable participation in high-quality early learning programs (Shelton et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023).

Implementation science offers structured approaches for translating research evidence into effective practice across education, health, and social systems (Aarons et al., 2011; Damschroder et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2024; Nilsen, 2015). However, existing frameworks such as the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR), Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment (EPIS), and RE-AIM primarily emphasize organizational readiness, fidelity, and outcomes, offering limited guidance for addressing equity as a cross-cutting implementation mechanism (Baumann & Cabassa, 2020; Damschroder et al., 2022; Gustafson et al., 2023; Shelton et al., 2020). Consequently, programs designed to serve diverse populations may inadvertently reinforce inequities if contextual, cultural, and historical dimensions are not explicitly analyzed and integrated into implementation processes.

Recent literature highlights the need to embed equity principles directly into implementation science to ensure that interventions are not only effective but also contextually responsive and just (Greenhalgh et al., 2017; Shelton et al., 2021; Woodward et al., 2019). While emerging studies in health and community-based research have begun to articulate equity-focused frameworks, few have been applied or adapted to early childhood education, where disparities are influenced by complex ecological factors such as family engagement, workforce capacity,

and local community resources (Shelton et al., 2021).

For this study, equity in education is operationalized as the systematic process of identifying and eliminating disparities in access, participation, and outcomes by addressing the structural and contextual barriers that produce inequitable experiences. This approach moves beyond equality of inputs to emphasize shared power, representation, and meaningful participation among families, educators, and communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs (Kania et al., 2018).

Despite growing attention to equity within broader educational reform, a gap remains in the availability of practical frameworks that explicitly integrate equity into every phase of program implementation in early childhood education. Existing models either focus on clinical or health domains or treat equity as an outcome rather than a guiding principle. This gap limits educators' and researchers' ability to operationalize equity through measurable, replicable, and sustainable processes.

To address this gap, this study introduces the Equity-Centered Implementation Framework for Early Years (ECIF-EY), a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented model that embeds equity considerations throughout the implementation process. The ECIF-EY synthesizes insights from implementation science, equity frameworks, cultural adaptation theory, and community-based participatory research to guide equitable practice. Specifically, the objective of this study is to develop, describe, and visualize the ECIF-EY framework and demonstrate its potential to support equitable implementation of early childhood educational initiatives across diverse contexts.

## METHODS

The development of the Equity-Centered Implementation Framework for Early Years (ECIF-EY) followed a structured, evidence-informed qualitative design process combining systematic literature review, comparative framework analysis, and iterative model refinement. This approach ensured both theoretical rigor and practical relevance, enabling the framework to reflect diverse

educational contexts and address equity gaps in implementation science.

### **Participants and Sources of Data**

This study did not involve direct participants or human subjects. Instead, the data were derived from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual studies published between 2010 and 2025. The inclusion of literature from education, health, and social science fields ensured a cross-disciplinary understanding of implementation processes (Metz et al., 2021). A total of 112 articles were initially identified, with 68 meeting inclusion criteria for relevance to early childhood education, equity, or implementation science. Key frameworks reviewed included CFIR (Damschroder et al., 2009), EPIS (Aarons et al., 2011), RE-AIM (Damschroder et al., 2022), and complementary equity-centered models (Baumann & Cabassa, 2020; Shelton et al., 2020; Woodward et al., 2019).

### **Data Collection and Literature Review Process**

A systematic literature review was conducted using ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science databases. Search terms included “Implementation Framework”, “Equity in Early Childhood Education”, “Cultural Adaptation”, and “Community-Based Participatory Research”. Studies were included if they (a) were peer-reviewed, (b) were published between 2010 and 2025, (c) addressed at least one implementation science construct, and (d) explicitly considered equity, diversity, or inclusion (Tricco et al., 2020).

The review process followed four steps: (1) identification of relevant frameworks and theoretical foundations, (2) extraction of constructs and principles related to equity integration, (3) comparison of conceptual overlaps and gaps among frameworks, and (4) synthesis of findings into preliminary framework domains. This structured approach provided transparency and replicability in the translation of theoretical and empirical insights into framework components.

### **Instruments and Analytical Framework**

Although this research did not employ survey instruments or experimental measures, analytic tools were used to guide the conceptual synthesis. NVivo software supported qualitative coding and thematic analysis of extracted literature, enabling identification of recurring equity mechanisms, barriers, and facilitators within implementation processes (Powell et al., 2019). Thematic nodes were categorized according to levels of influence (systemic, organizational, interpersonal, and individual) to capture multi-level determinants of equity in early childhood program delivery (de Royston et al., 2020).

Matrix comparison analyses were also conducted to evaluate the presence or absence of equity constructs across major frameworks (CFIR, EPIS, RE-AIM). This analysis revealed that while these models provide robust structures for planning and evaluating implementation, they lack explicit attention to issues of power, representation, and contextual adaptation central to equity. These findings informed the structure and guiding principles of the ECIF-EY.

### **Data Analysis and Framework Development Procedures**

Framework development proceeded through four iterative phases:

1. Evidence Synthesis: Integration of literature across implementation science, cultural adaptation, and participatory research to identify key constructs related to equity.
2. Case Analysis: Review of published case studies on early childhood implementation initiatives to extract best practices for equitable engagement, adaptation, and evaluation.
3. Framework Construction: Thematic clustering of findings into five core domains representing distinct but interconnected equity processes.
4. Iterative Refinement: Critical review and validation of the emerging framework by three external scholars in implementation science and equity education, resulting in conceptual alignment and definitional precision.

Throughout these phases, reflexive analytic memos were maintained to document reasoning, decisions, and conceptual shifts. The process emphasized practical applicability, ensuring that ECIF-EY not only reflected theoretical integration but also offered implementable strategies for practitioners and researchers. The resulting ECIF-EY thus represents an empirically informed, theoretically grounded framework designed to embed equity within early childhood implementation processes systematically.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Equity-Centered Implementation Framework for Early Years (ECIF-EY) was developed to address documented limitations in existing implementation frameworks that insufficiently consider equity as a guiding principle. The ECIF-EY integrates implementation science, equity theory, cultural adaptation, and community-based participatory research to create a comprehensive framework for embedding equity throughout early childhood program design, delivery, and evaluation (Nilsen, 2015). The following section presents the five

domains of the framework and illustrates how each contributes to an integrated equity-centered approach.

### Overview of the Framework

The ECIF-EY comprises five interrelated domains that collectively promote equitable implementation: Contextual Equity Analysis, Stakeholder Engagement and Power Sharing, Cultural Adaptation and Relevance, Equity-Focused Implementation Strategies, and Equity-Oriented Evaluation. These domains function synergistically to ensure that equity is not treated as an outcome or isolated step, but rather as an ongoing process that guides all stages of implementation.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of the ECIF-EY, depicting the five domains as overlapping circles to emphasize their dynamic interdependence and cyclical nature. It illustrates the five interconnected domains of the ECIF-EY. The circular design represents the continuous and iterative process of embedding equity throughout implementation stages. Overlapping areas indicate the interdependence of domains and the feedback loops that support ongoing adaptation and reflection.

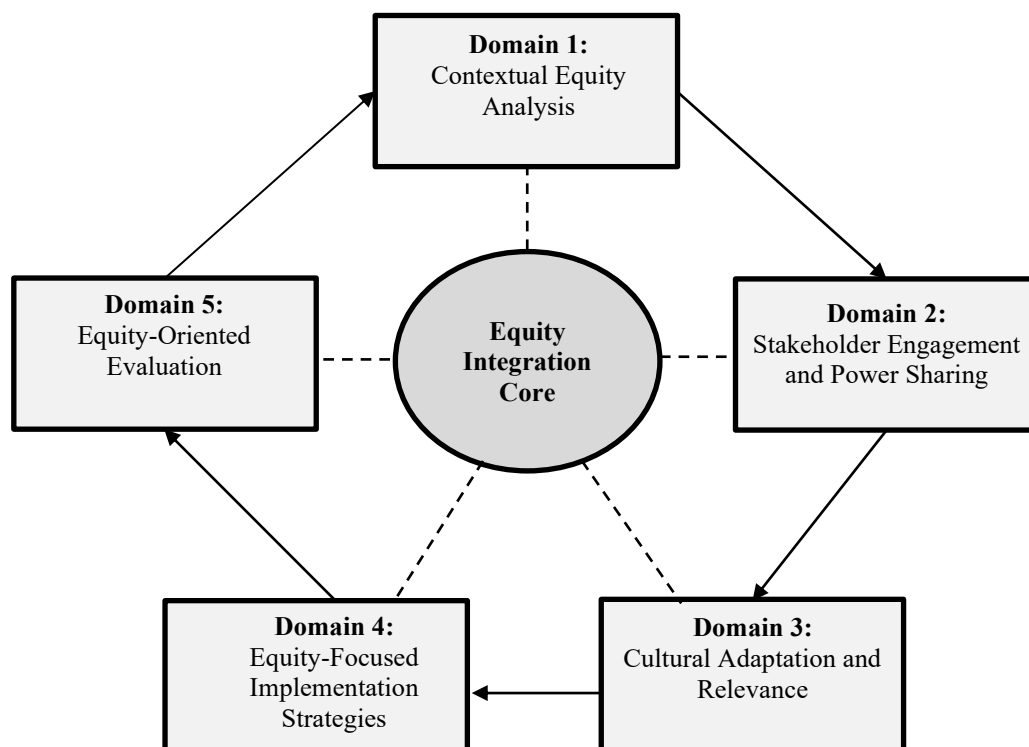


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of ECIF-EY Domains

### ***Domain 1: Contextual Equity Analysis***

This foundational domain emphasizes understanding the historical, social, cultural, and economic conditions that shape the implementation environment. Drawing on the PROGRESS-Plus framework (O'Neill et al., 2014), this analysis considers variables such as place of residence, race, ethnicity, occupation, gender, education, socioeconomic status, and social capital.

Unlike traditional implementation frameworks that focus primarily on organizational readiness or structural capacity, the ECIF-EY positions contextual equity analysis as an essential precursor to all decision-making. This ensures that programs address systemic barriers and community assets rather than merely surface-level needs. Measurable indicators include the extent of equity-focused data collection, representation of marginalized groups in planning, and identification of structural determinants influencing implementation feasibility (Greenhalgh et al., 2017).

### ***Domain 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Power Sharing***

Authentic stakeholder participation is central to equity-centered implementation. This domain operationalizes shared governance and power redistribution among educators, families, and community members. Guided by community-based participatory research principles (Israel et al., 2013), the ECIF-EY extends stakeholder involvement beyond consultation to co-creation and decision-making authority.

Key strategies include forming community advisory boards with voting power, creating transparent communication mechanisms, and embedding feedback loops throughout program design and evaluation. Measurable indicators include the number of community stakeholders in governance roles, evidence of shared decision-making, and qualitative assessments of trust and collaboration (Metz et al., 2021).

This domain addresses a key shortcoming of existing models, such as EPIS, which incorporate stakeholder engagement but do not operationalize power-sharing or equity in governance structures (Woodward et al., 2019).

### ***Domain 3: Cultural Adaptation and Relevance***

Cultural adaptation ensures that implementation processes and interventions align with community norms, languages, and values while maintaining evidence-based fidelity. Building on Bernal's (2009) model, this domain integrates adaptation across linguistic, contextual, and relational dimensions specific to early childhood education.

Adaptation activities may include revising instructional materials for cultural resonance, hiring multilingual staff, and incorporating local narratives or family traditions into programming (Shelton et al., 2020; Shelton et al., 2021; Shelton & Brownson, 2024). Continuous feedback and reflection are central to maintaining both fidelity and relevance.

Measurable indicators include the proportion of culturally adapted materials validated by community members, documentation of fidelity-adaptation decisions, and family satisfaction surveys reflecting perceived cultural alignment. This domain strengthens implementation science by framing adaptation not as deviation but as a deliberate equity mechanism ensuring inclusivity and sustainability.

### ***Domain 4: Equity-Focused Implementation Strategies***

This domain articulates actionable strategies that target the mechanisms through which inequities are produced and perpetuated within implementation systems (Powell et al., 2019). Extending the ERIC taxonomy (Waltz et al., 2019), ECIF-EY identifies equity-driven strategies that promote inclusivity and capacity building.

Examples include equity-centered professional development for educators, the integration of anti-bias pedagogies, language-accessible communication, flexible scheduling to accommodate diverse family needs, and intersectoral collaboration with social and health services (de Royston et al., 2020).

Measurable indicators include participation rates in equity-focused training, documentation of inclusive implementation plans, and evaluation of adaptation processes linked to equitable outcomes. By explicitly

embedding equity mechanisms into implementation strategies, ECIF-EY advances beyond existing models that treat inclusion as secondary to fidelity.

#### **Domain 5: Equity-Oriented Evaluation**

Evaluation is integral to assessing progress toward equity goals. This domain prioritizes participatory evaluation processes that integrate both quantitative and qualitative methods, allowing communities to define meaningful outcomes. Evaluation tools include data disaggregation by demographic variables, stakeholder interviews, and joint interpretation of results.

Validated instruments such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Equity Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva et al., 2010) and the Equity and Inclusion Framework Rubric (NAEYC, 2020) may serve as complementary tools for assessing equity outcomes and monitoring progress over time. These tools can be adapted to local contexts to align with ECIF-EY indicators while maintaining measurement rigor.

Measurable indicators include the presence of community-defined success metrics, documented feedback loops influencing program refinement, and transparent dissemination of findings to stakeholders.

Figure 2 displays the ECIF-EY process flow, showing how each domain functions sequentially yet cyclically—from contextual analysis to evaluation—with feedback mechanisms that inform continuous improvement (Metz et al., 2021).

Figure 2 depicts the sequential and cyclical process of implementing the ECIF-EY. Each stage informs the next, with Equity-Oriented Evaluation feeding results back into Contextual Equity Analysis to guide continuous improvement and ensure sustained equity integration across contexts.

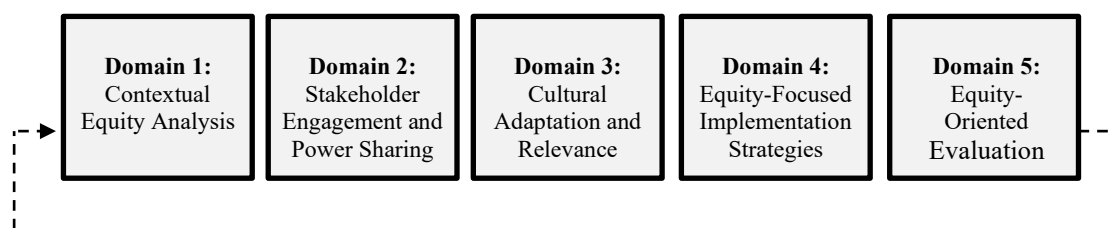
### **Discussion: Theoretical Integration and Comparative Perspective**

The ECIF-EY extends existing frameworks by integrating equity as a cross-cutting construct across all implementation phases. Unlike CFIR, which conceptualizes context primarily in terms of readiness and environment, ECIF-EY foregrounds power, representation, and historical inequity. Similarly, while EPIS emphasizes process stages, ECIF-EY adds the relational and cultural mechanisms necessary for equitable practice (Gustafson et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2025). The framework thus offers both conceptual and operational advances by synthesizing theory and providing measurable strategies.

While the ECIF-EY promotes shared governance and participatory processes, practical challenges may arise in balancing stakeholder priorities, maintaining long-term engagement, and addressing power asymmetries. Sustaining collaboration requires ongoing facilitation, trust-building, and transparent decision-making processes to prevent stakeholder fatigue and ensure that diverse voices remain influential throughout implementation.

This integration illustrates how equity can move from a theoretical aspiration to an actionable, testable process. The inclusion of two visual models further supports accessibility for practitioners and enhances utility in diverse early learning environments (Kania et al., 2018).

Collectively, the five domains demonstrate that achieving equity in implementation requires structural analysis, inclusive governance, cultural responsiveness, targeted strategy development, and participatory evaluation. The ECIF-EY establishes equity not as an add-on but as a continuous guiding process embedded within implementation science. Through measurable



**Figure 2.** ECIF-EY Implementation Process Flow

indicators, iterative adaptation, and collaborative evaluation, the framework provides a robust foundation for equitable and sustainable educational transformation (NAEYC, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The Equity-Centered Implementation Framework for Early Years (ECIF-EY) provides a structured approach for embedding equity throughout all phases of program implementation in early childhood education. By integrating insights from implementation science, cultural adaptation theory, and community-based participatory research, the framework positions equity as both a process and an outcome of effective implementation.

The ECIF-EY advances the field by translating complex equity principles into practical, measurable, and contextually adaptable processes. Its five interconnected domains—Contextual Equity Analysis, Stakeholder Engagement and Power Sharing, Cultural Adaptation and Relevance, Equity-Focused Implementation Strategies, and Equity-Oriented Evaluation—offer a comprehensive roadmap for ensuring that equity is systematically integrated into planning, delivery, and evaluation.

This study contributes a novel synthesis of theoretical and empirical insights, addressing persistent gaps in implementation science where equity considerations have often been treated as peripheral. By delineating equity mechanisms within each domain and providing corresponding indicators, ECIF-EY operationalizes concepts that have historically remained abstract or aspirational. The framework's cyclical design supports continuous learning and responsiveness to evolving community needs, enhancing its adaptability across diverse educational contexts.

For practitioners, ECIF-EY offers actionable guidance to co-design, monitor, and sustain equitable practices in early learning environments. For researchers, it provides a testable framework for examining how equity-driven implementation processes influence outcomes across varied contexts. Future studies should pilot ECIF-EY in diverse early childhood settings to assess its feasibility,

scalability, and long-term impact on reducing disparities in access and outcomes.

Ultimately, the ECIF-EY repositions equity from a peripheral concern to a central organizing principle within implementation science. By linking theory to practice through participatory processes and continuous feedback, the framework offers a sustainable path toward justice-oriented educational transformation.

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