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Evaluating the Quality of Pre-Service Preparation for Teachers in Regard to Culturally Responsive Teaching for English Language Learners

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Evaluating the Quality of Pre-Service Preparation for Teachers in Regard to Culturally Responsive Teaching for English Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper will focus on a study about culturally responsive teaching and English Language Learners. Specifically, this paper will evaluate pre-service and early service teachers and their ability to provide culturally responsive teaching to their English Language-Learning students. There will be three different subtopics, which will pertain to comfort levels with culturally responsive teaching, creating a culturally responsive classroom environment, and reflecting on pre-service training. This topic is extremely important because much of the research on culturally responsive teaching indicates a disconnect between teachers and their English Language Learners, however, it is vital that students feel comfortable and at ease in their learning environment. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, students will be unable to learn or retain information if they do not first feel safe and secure.

This study will be conducted by means of a quantitative survey that evaluates both pre-service educators and current teachers that have been in the classroom for less than five years. While the study will be geographically limited to the area of Central Pennsylvania and the surrounding school districts of Elizabethtown College, the implications of this research will apply to students across the country. Ideally, the information that is obtained from this study will help pre-service and early service teachers to improve the education of English Language Learners by implementing culturally responsive teaching methods, demonstrate to higher education institutions that pre-service educators must be trained in culturally responsive teaching, and encourage school districts to use professional development to train their staff.

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Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately one in every ten United States students in 2018 was an English Language Learner, which equates to about 5 million students across the country. The main languages spoken by ELLs in the United States include Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Somali, Russian, Portuguese and Haitian Creole (Council on Occupational Education, 2021). Despite the large percentage of English Language Learners in the classroom, however, there were only 78,000 public school teachers in the 2015-2016 school year whose job was to assist ELLs in their education (New York University, 2018). The discrepancy between the growing number of English language-learning students and the number of professionals available to support them is problematic for schools, staff, and students alike. Furthermore, when English Language Learners are present in the classroom, their needs may go unaddressed. For ELLs to truly succeed in the classroom, they must be taught with culturally responsive teaching methods. Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as “the process of using familiar cultural information and processes to scaffold learning” (Hammond, page 156). Culturally responsive teaching is “focused on relationships, cognitive scaffolding, and critical social awareness.”

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the quality of pre-service training for teachers when it comes to culturally responsive teaching, and to assess the skills and confidence that pre-service and early-service teachers have in this area. This study will be broken down into three areas: confidence and comfort level with situations pertaining to culturally responsive teaching, fostering a culturally responsive classroom environment, and actually measuring the quality of pre-service training. However, the study is geographically limited, as it will be focused in the general area of Elizabethtown College—Lancaster County and Central Pennsylvania. Therefore,

even though some of the statistics and prior research exists on a national scale, the findings of this particular study will be focused on this region of the country, as well as the corresponding socioeconomic statuses and language groups.

To carry out this study and interpret the findings, there are some key definitions that must be known. One of these is implicit bias, which can be defined as “the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape our responses to certain groups especially around race, class and language. Implicit bias operates involuntarily, often without one’s awareness or intentional control” (Hammond, page 156). Another essential definition is a learning partnership, which is a “teacher-student relationship in which the teacher builds trust and becomes the student’s ally in order to help the student reach a higher level of achievement” (Hammond, page 157).

A third important term in relation to this study is zone of proximal development, or ZPD. SPD is “the difference between what a learned can do without help and what they can do with help” (Hammond, page 160). Furthermore, a student’s affective filter can be defined as a learner’s attitudes that “serve as a kind of filter that block out incoming messages and prevent them from triggering acquisition” (Freeman and Freeman, page 65). Finally, a student’s intellectual capacity “refers to a student’s malleable information processing power that goes through neuroplasticity” (Hammond, page 157).

Ideally at the conclusion of this study, information will be collected in all three of the major areas: the confidence and comfort level that pre-service and early-service teachers have regarding culturally responsive teaching, the ability that teachers have to create a culturally responsive classroom environment, and the quality of pre-service training for culturally responsive teaching in this area. From this insight and the data collected, a plan can be created to

improve the presence and quality of culturally responsive teaching and advance the education of ELLs in local schools.

Review of Literature

Prior to the current decade, finding resources on culturally responsive teaching would have been very difficult. In recent years, however, culturally responsive teaching has emerged as a very important educational issues—one that is being increasingly discussed and educational conferences in seminars, and in books, articles, and studies as well. Because this is a very recent issue, most of the sources that exist on this topic are current. There is research on culturally responsive teaching, but much of the information falls into a few main subtopics, and gaps in the research do exist. The subtopics include the need for culturally responsive teaching, educating and informing pre-service educators, providing training and resources for current teachers, and balancing academic content while implementing culturally responsive teaching in the classroom.

The Need for Culturally Responsive Teaching:

One of the most important themes within the research is the need for culturally responsive teaching. Zaretta Hammond's book, entitled Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Engagement and Rigor among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students focuses entirely on this issue and on the reaction of students' brains to teaching that makes them feel included and safe in the classroom. The introduction to Hammond's book draws on Hammond's own experience as a young, African American child attending school in a predominantly white neighborhood that was later integrated with another neighborhood school. Hammond draws the conclusion that culturally responsive teaching is absolutely essential for minority students—without schooling that values their differences, culture and talents, students will struggle to succeed. Later in the introduction, Hammond writes that “culturally responsive

teaching has the power to close achievement gaps. When practiced correctly and consistently, it can get underperforming students of color who are caught on the wrong side of the achievement gap ready for rigorous learning by building their brainpower... building brainpower is the missing link to closing the achievement gap for underperforming culturally and linguistically diverse students” (Hammond, page 3). In this statement, Hammond sums up many of the main points of her book. Culturally responsive teaching is necessary because there is such a large achievement gap between white and minority students, and between English speaking students and their English-learning peers. When educators are able to implement culturally responsive teaching methods in their classroom, they have the power to not only boost the brainpower of minority students but bridge the substantial achievement gap as well.

According to Hammond’s book, culturally responsive teaching is extremely necessary because there has been “so much reform and so little change” (Hammond, page 3). The issues that persist in the American education system today are many of the same problems that leading figures in education have been trying to solve for years. However, Hammond truly believes that culturally responsive teaching is the key. Hammond writes her book for three main audiences: classroom teachers, instructional coaches, and instructional leaders. The text is meant to demonstrate the severity of the need for culturally responsive teaching, demonstrate why culturally responsive teaching is essential, and show what happens to students’ brains and their success in the classroom when their culture and experiences are integrated into a classroom setting.

Another source that reinforces the need for culturally responsive teaching is Fisher and Frey’s article in *Educational Leadership*, entitled “Three Conditions English Learners Need to Thrive.” In the first paragraph of his article, Fisher and Frey discuss past education initiatives,

stating that these measures were created for the majority of students. In the past, minority students were not at the forefront of educational policy or schoolwide efforts—minority students and ELLs were expected to adapt to the measures that allowed the majority of students to be successful. Culturally responsive teaching, however, alters this view, and echoing Hammond’s sentiments, Fisher and Frey find that culturally responsive teaching is completely necessary to close achievement gaps and help all students to be successful. With that in mind, the article gives three conditions that must be met in the classroom. The first circumstance is that high expectations must be paired with culturally responsive teaching. The article states that “communicating high expectations helps students see their potential—and conveys respect for each learner” (Fisher and Frey, page 84). High expectations that are still attainable encourage students to keep working towards educational goals, complete their assignments, and be persistent in their learning. Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching can assist in helping families to feel more connected to their student’s education, which can increase confidence and encourage them to achieve the high expectations.

The second condition that is discussed in Fisher and Frey’s article is attention to social and emotional needs. The article states that “English learners may require additional supports to employ certain emotion-regulation skills needed in the classroom” (Fisher and Frey, page 85). To do this, Fisher and Frey suggest using a “vocabulary schema for ‘emotion’ words that include heritage-language equivalents for English words and visual representations” (Fisher and Frey, page 85). When social-emotional learning is paired with culturally responsive teaching methods, students will feel far more connected and invested in the classroom environment. When students are more comfortable and relaxed, their affective filter is lowered, and they are far more likely to succeed. The third condition in “Three Conditions English Learners Need to Thrive” is

purposefully designed intervention systems. The article states that most middle and high schools have ELLs that read at a level far below grade expectations, but there are no supports in place to address this substantial issue. The article then gives the example of a school that created an after-school class for English language development in not just reading, but also writing, speaking, and listening specifically to serve these students. While many types of intervention system exist, students in this example received the necessary academic support, individual or small group attention, and enrichment in multiple different subjects.

Students in classrooms without high expectations, social-emotional learning and intervention systems are not equipped to be successful. When these measures are implemented in conjunction with culturally responsive teaching, students can excel. High expectations, social emotional learning and intervention systems are components of culturally responsive teaching, which as Hammond explains and Fisher and Frey emphasize, is necessary to close the achievement gap and support minority students.

Education Pre-Service Teachers:

There are also significant amounts of research on education pre-service teachers. Hu, Zu, Neshyba, Geng and Turner's writing in *Asia -Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* is a study that examines pre-service teachers' competencies in terms of culturally responsive teaching. The article suggests that when teachers are educated on culturally responsive teaching before they step foot in a classroom of their own, they will be better prepared and far more equipped to practice culturally responsive teaching in real time. This article, entitled "A Multi-Dimensional Model: Implications for Preparing Pre-Service teachers for Culturally Responsive Teaching," looks at a field experience model for pre-service teachers where participants did more than just observe a mentor teacher from the back of the classroom. In this model, pre-service educators

interacted with minority students and families through a community walk and other community event participation, classroom observations, interactions with English Language-learning students, and interviewing experienced teachers. Hu, Xu, Neshyba, Geng and Turner then examined the results of the study, which showed that this field experience model effectively prepared pre-service educators to practice culturally responsive teaching. The study also allowed the authors to make suggestions for other pre-service education programs.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this article are that pre-service education programs must be intentional about culturally responsive teaching. Simply placing students in classrooms to observe and teaching classes about diversity is not enough—future educators need real, genuine experience with culturally responsive teaching. Like anything else, practice improves performance, and this idea implies to education as well. The article from *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* demonstrates that when pre-service educators receive quality training for culturally responsive teaching, they will be able to foster classroom environments where minority students can be successful.

Providing Training and Resources for Current Educators:

Pre-service education is extremely important for future educators, but what about teachers who have already started their career? A large percentage of teachers across the American school system did not receive training in culturally responsive teaching prior to entering the field of education. Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail and Portes' writing in *Teacher and Teacher Education*, entitled "They Come with Nothing: How Professional Development in a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Shapes Teacher Attitudes Towards Latino/a English Language Learners" suggests that in-services and professional development are key. This article addresses a teacher-student disconnect, mainly between white, monolingual teachers

and their minority students. Surveys and statistics in this article demonstrate that teachers often assume that ELLs are less capable than their English-speaking peers, thus placing lower expectations among them.

In order to resolve this discrepancy and provide students with quality education, teachers need to implement culturally responsive teaching. This can be difficult, especially for teachers that were never trained on how to do this or may not even know what culturally responsive teaching is. The responsibility then falls on administrators and supervisors to provide professional development to their staff in this area. It is not just teachers that need training, either. For a truly positive and successful school environment, substitutes, aides, and all other staff must also treat students with respect and practice culturally responsive techniques as well. Mellom, Straubhaar, Balderas, Ariail and Portes' article examines a study that evaluated the effects of teacher training in this area. Some regions of the country saw rapid progress in implementing culturally responsive teaching after training and professional development sessions, while in other areas of the country, the progress was a bit slower. Nonetheless, the authors conclude that professional development can assist teachers in resolving their attitudes toward minority students over time, while simultaneously allowing them to develop culturally responsive teaching skills.

Balancing Academic Content While Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching:

In general, teachers face pressure to “teach to the test” and cover curriculum. The article “Developing Cultural Responsiveness While Teaching Content Standards” from *American Secondary Education* addresses this complex issue—how do teachers cover material at an appropriate pace while still implementing culturally responsive teaching? The article discusses the Fulbright-Hays Group Project Grant that was awarded to Ashland University in 2015. With

the grant, Ashland University sent a group of 16 students to Brazil for a month to gain experience and become more culturally responsive teachers. To do this, the group of students focused on three aspects: the Brazilian culture, the Portuguese language, and the familiar experience in Brazil. As the article states, “a homogeneous group of exclusively Caucasian practicing and pre-service teachers hoped to learn how they represent a different culture in their instructional planning” (Ellis, et.al, page 71).

From the experiences of the sixteen students, authors Ellis, Abreu-Ellis, Moore, Aukerman and Buttil were able to create a model for developing cultural awareness and empathy. They were also able to address the challenge of covering material and meeting content standards, stating that when teachers practice culturally responsive teaching, they are simultaneously able to better cover material for all their students. When culturally responsive teaching is not utilized, minority students or ELLs are generally on the wrong side of the achievement gap. However, when students are included and their needs are met in the classroom, they are more likely to learn the content the first time around, eliminating the need for teachers to re-teach and constantly review past material. As the article states, “teachers should engage in an ongoing process of: (a) understanding that culture has a role in education, (b) actively learning about students’ culture and communities, (c) learning about the beliefs and values of a variety of cultures... and (d) broadening their awareness and gaining insight into issues facing diverse students, families, and communities” (Ellis et.al, page 70). When these goals are accomplished, teachers and students alike are better equipped for success, and culturally responsive teaching is implemented while content goals are simultaneously achieved.

Gaps in the research exist in several areas. The first of these is breaking culturally responsive teaching down into levels—for example, the elementary, middle, and secondary age

groups. Furthermore, it was difficult to obtain sources on what is actually being done to promote this type of teaching—there is research on the need for culturally responsive teaching, and why it is important, but not much on how to actually implement the method in the classroom. As previously stated, there was an abundance of findings on the “why,” but not much material on the “how.”

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

As previously stated in the introduction, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the quality of pre-service training for teachers when it comes to culturally responsive teaching, and to assess the skills and confidence that pre-service and early-service teachers have in this area.

Quantitative v. Qualitative Research

According to the reference text Practical Research and Design, written by Paul Leedy, Jeanne Ellis Ormord and Laura Ruth Johnson, the definition of quantitative research is “research yielding information that is inherently numerical in nature and can be easily reduced to numbers.” Qualitative research, on the other hand, is “research yielding information that cannot be easily reduced; typically involves an in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon.” The research collected by this study is first quantitative, as it can be condensed into statements such as “60% of teachers within the first five years of their career felt prepared to implement this skill.” The data collected can be portrayed through graphs and charts, meaning that it is quantitative data.

Sample Population

For this study, the sample population will be comprised of both pre-service and early service teachers that are either currently enrolled or are alumnus of Elizabethtown College. The

pre-service teacher candidate would be an Elizabethtown college student in the education department who is presently a part of education classes and has completed at least one field placement or student teaching experience. That way, the pre-service teacher would have at least a general idea of what it feels like to be directly involved in a classroom and with a diverse group of students, and additionally, as a baseline assessment of their comfortability and confidence with culturally responsive teaching. The early service teacher candidates would have less than five years of teaching experience, be a graduate of Elizabethtown College, and would be able to reflect upon their college education and the training and preparation that they received regarding culturally responsive teaching.

Data Collection

In order to collect data and information about the quality of pre-service training for teachers in this area, and also to assess skills and confidence, participants in the study will completed a survey. The survey had several parts, the first of which pertained to confidence and comfort level with different situations. A series of questions presented participants with several scenarios, and then gave the participants a scale of one to five with which to respond. On the scale, one was “very confident,” two was “moderately confident,” three was “neither confident/uncomfortable,” four was “moderately uncomfortable,” and five was “completely uncomfortable in their abilities to handle a situation that relates to maintaining a culturally responsive classroom environment. A sample question from this part of the survey read: “For the first half of the year, you agree to take on a student teacher. As the student teacher works from the front of the room and takes on teaching responsibilities, they increasingly begin to instruct the class. As the weeks go on, you notice the teacher calling on a few students, and rarely calling

on your English Language Learning students. How comfortable do you feel addressing this discrepancy with your student teacher?"

The next part of the survey was about skills that foster a culturally responsive classroom atmosphere. This section of survey questions presented survey participants with essential skills, and then once again, provide a scale, however, in this section, a sixth option gave participants the ability to select "I have not had the opportunity to implement this skill." The other choices were one, stating "I do this almost all of the time" two, which was "I do this most of the time," three, which said, "I do this about half of the time," four, which read "I occasionally do this," and lastly, the fifth choice, which said "I rarely do this." An example of a question from this part of the survey was: "When providing assignments for class, I use word problems and examples that are inclusive of many cultures and backgrounds."

The last section of the survey pertained to pre-service training. These questions had a three-point scale, with the first answer choice stating, "my pre-service training completely prepared me," the second-choice reading "my pre-service training somewhat prepared me," and the third choice, which said "my pre-service training did not prepare me." A sample question from this section of the survey would give participants a statement such as: "reflecting on my own biases and opinions." Participants would then select the appropriate answer choice based on their reflections of their pre-service training.

From the information gathered, the statistics were then condensed and compared. If the given skill in one of the survey questions is "incorporating ELL students' home traditions into the classroom," then the survey demonstrated exactly what percentage of teachers felt completely comfortable, and what percentage of teachers were not comfortable at all. Because these survey results will be numerical, this study is quantitative in nature. The results of this

study returned data such as “60% of participants felt moderately comfortable in this situation.

Taking a quantitative approach was far more logical for this study because the results can then be demonstrated with statistics, providing numerical data for the purpose of the research and analysis. If the study had been qualitative instead, much of the information collected from participants would be objective; however, putting the information onto a qualitative scale made it much simpler to compare and evaluate results.

Developing the Survey

To develop the survey, information and context was drawn from many different sources, particularly Zaretta Hammond’s text, entitled Pre-Service Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Engagement and Rigor among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students. Furthermore, I drew from other prominent surveys on culturally responsive teaching to create scenarios for the survey. Ideally, the results of this study will benefit several groups. First and foremost, the survey will benefit the English Language-Learning students themselves, as they have the most to gain from classrooms with culturally responsive environments, and the most to lose from classrooms that are not culturally responsive. The results of this study will also hopefully aid teachers, as they will have their own comfort levels, confidence, and abilities laid out clearly in front of them. When people can recognize areas in which they struggle, they can work towards improvement in those areas, and when individuals are able to see their strong points, they can seek to implement those into their teaching as well. Finally, this study should assist Elizabethtown College with developing a culturally responsive education program. Much like individual teachers, if the college can see where teachers feel ill-prepared, they can adjust their programs and seek to better equip future teachers for culturally responsive classrooms. Likewise,

if they see areas where pre-service teachers have confidence and capabilities, they know what not to alter or adjust within their programs.

Audience for the Study

As previously discussed, the audience for this study includes Elizabethtown College, and other surrounding colleges and school districts in Central Pennsylvania and Lancaster County. The study will focus on pre-service educators and teachers at the early years of their career.

Results

For the first part of the survey, which addressed participants' confidence and comfort level in culturally responsive teaching situations, the results were consistent. No participant answered that they were "moderately uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" to any given situation. Every participant was at least moderately confident with all of the situations regarding culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. For the first of the five questions in the section, the response was regarding handling a holiday art project that solely focuses on Christmas. 35% of survey candidates responded feeling very confident, 60% of respondents answered that they were moderately confident, and 5% of those answering the survey reported feeling neither confident nor uncomfortable. For the next question, which was about a mispronunciation of a ELL student's name, 65% of candidates reported feeling very confident—an uptick from the previous question. The data collected from questions three, four and five demonstrated the same results. Pre-service and early-service teachers felt moderately to very confident and comfortable handling culturally responsive situations in their classrooms.

For the next section, it appeared that generally, pre-service and early-service teachers from Elizabethtown College felt as though they possessed culturally responsive traits and skills within their classrooms. 50% of participants reported always staying calm while facing

challenging classroom-management situations, while the other 50% stated that they had the same trait in most situations. While most pre-service educators stated that they had not been given an opportunity to possess this skill, 15% of in-service participants reported that every visual in their classroom represents students of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures, while 40% stated that most of their visuals are representative. Moving on to literature, 50% of candidates who had an opportunity to implement culturally responsive material in their classroom said that all of the literature in the classroom is culturally responsive and representative, while 42% reported that most of the literature in their classroom is representative of different cultures and identities. Throughout the other questions in this research section, the themes were consistent. Pre-service teachers indicated that they may not have had the opportunities yet to implement culturally responsive teaching practices, but that when they were presented with experiences, they tried to consistently use methods and exercises that were culturally responsive and representative. For in-service teachers, the results were similar. The majority of in-service teachers and graduates of the Elizabethtown College teacher preparation program reported implementing culturally responsive practices and ideas at least most of the time.

The final section of the survey asked both pre-service and in-service teachers to reflect on their teacher preparation program, either in completion or in part. In keeping with the previous two sections, both in-service and pre-service educators that participated in the survey reported that they felt adequately prepared. For example, question 33 of the survey prompted participants with “utilizing students’ prior knowledge when implementing lessons.” 30% of participants felt somewhat prepared by Elizabethtown’s teacher preparation program, while 70% of participants felt completely prepared. No participant reported feeling ill-prepared for considering prior knowledge while putting together lessons. The outlier in the data was question 30, which asked

participants about adequately communicating with parents, guardians, and families. 1/5 of survey participants responded that they did not feel prepared by Elizabethtown College's teacher preparation program. However, in topics such as building relationships with students, reflecting on personal biases and opinions, and establishing clear learning goals and expectations for students, participants overwhelmingly reported feeling at least somewhat prepared.

Conclusion

The statistics and data show that ELLs face great difficulty while receiving an education. There is a growing number of ELLs and a very small number of teachers certified to teach them. Latino/a students, many of whom are ELLs, have a high pushout/dropout rate as a demographic group, and their college matriculation rate is lower in comparison to their white and Asian peers. Clearly, there is a disconnect between ELLs and the school system, with many experts in the field pointing to culturally responsive teaching being a key part of the solution.

As a result of this disconnect, I was anticipating different results from the survey. I thought that teachers would report back feeling ill-prepared to interact with their ELLs or would feel less comfortable and confident when responding to the survey questions. The results of the survey proved the opposite of my expectations— the participants felt, for the most part, prepared and confident. There were a few exceptions, but the responses demonstrated satisfaction with pre-service training and with the quality of instruction pertaining to ELL students.

Why did the results of this study demonstrate opposite results to my expectations? I think that there could be a few different reasons for this. First, this study was extremely limited, not just to Central Pennsylvania, but to Elizabethtown College, because the in-service participants are graduates of the college, and the pre-service participants will graduate from the college. Therefore, the survey only assessed one pre-service program— if the scope of the survey was

wider, the results may have been different. Another reason for this might be that there is a discrepancy between how teachers perceive their instruction and how students are connecting with the teaching.

Future Directions for the Research:

There are a variety of future directions for this research. Culturally Responsive Teaching has important implications for the future of education in the United States, and while there is a lot of research on why Culturally Responsive Teaching is essential, there is a lack of findings on how to implement these methods in the classroom. One potential future direction includes surveying a larger number of pre-service and in-service educators. Furthermore, research could be conducted at other institutions beside Elizabethtown College. Examining differences across different geographical areas and states could yield different results, as could examining results from Historically Black Colleges and Universities or Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Another potential expansion of this research would be to survey the students of the in-service teacher participants. The teachers overwhelmingly reported feeling adequately prepared, but do the students' experiences match? Do students feel as though they are receiving an inclusive and representative education? A different direction could be to survey teachers who are further along in their career. Culturally responsive teaching is a relatively recent idea in the scope of the history of education. Do teachers who attend college years ago share the same sentiments as those at the beginning of their career? One last potential extension could be to survey substitute teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and other members of school faculty and staff. For a school district to have a truly culturally responsive atmosphere, all members of the faculty and staff must utilize culturally responsive practices.

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