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Strategies for Increasing Early Childhood Teachers' Self-Efficacy in Culturally Responsive Practices

Melissa Stormont, Nargiza Buranova, and Marina Antonova

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020), 10% of students in the public school population are English Language Learners (ELLs). The number of children with ELL needs has grown significantly; the NCES (2020) data project estimates that students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) will represent more than half of the total student population in public schools within the next 10 years. Young children in pre-school settings already reflect more culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds representing approximately 49% of children in preschool in the US (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). It is especially important for young children who are in their formative years, and likely in their first school experiences, that their teachers are culturally responsive.

Kourea et al. (2017) state that *"...students from CLD backgrounds include students whose race and ethnicity differ from the traditional European-American group. They may come from low socioeconomic households and/or can be English language learners (ELL)"* (p. 153). For the purpose of our article, the term culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) will be used to refer to US students whose cultural backgrounds are different from European-American learners, who may or may not speak English as a first language, and who are receiving education in the US. Research shows that teachers struggle to meet the needs of students from CLD backgrounds. Several factors may contribute to the lack of culturally responsive practices with young children from CLD backgrounds (Chu & Garcia, 2014, Gay, 2013; Sciuchetti, 2017). One factor is the lack of diversity in the teaching field. According to Data USA (2019), 65% of all early childhood providers are white (Non-Hispanic). This fact may contribute to providers' limited understanding

of their students' and their families' values, beliefs and other aspects that may influence behavior (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). When lack of knowledge is not met with continued education and professional development opportunities, teachers may use practices that are not responsive, including some negative practices.

In fact, research has underscored the potential of bias toward children of specific cultural backgrounds as early as preschool. Educators' biases can manifest in providing less challenging instructions, or lower expectations for diverse learners (Artiles et al., 2010; Sciuchetti, 2017; Van Garderen et al., 2017). Seminal research by Gilliam (2005) found that early childhood educators expected more negative behavior patterns from young children from diverse backgrounds when compared to their white peers; further research documented that expulsion practices in early childhood environment are applied to boys of diverse cultural backgrounds significantly more often than to other children (Gilliam et al., 2016).

As previously stated, another important factor is teacher preparedness; teachers of young children may receive little training in this area. Requirements for preschool teachers vary across states and school districts. Approximately 60% of Head Start educators hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2017). Additionally, most states do not have requirements other than a high school diploma for positions such as teacher's aide or auxiliary teacher (The National Council on Teacher Quality, 2016). Thus, early childhood providers' knowledge of evidence-based practices, overall, may vary drastically across school districts and private/public early childhood centers (Hemmeter et al., 2007). Early childhood providers' self-efficacy also plays a vital role in effective professional development, particularly for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. According to research, professional development plays an important role in educators' understanding of the importance of culturally

responsive teaching (CRT), increasing their knowledge about CRT and self-efficacy in delivering CRT practices (Cruz et al., 2019). Research has documented that comprehensive training on culturally responsive practices for educators positively impacted their attitude toward teaching children from diverse backgrounds (Fitchett et al., 2012).

Early childhood educators need information and training in order to become more responsive, supportive teachers. Educators also need to increase their self-efficacy related to cultural responsiveness, and their schools and programs should provide resources to support their professional development. To this end, the purpose of this article is to describe culturally responsive strategies, which can potentially increase early childhood provider's self-efficacy beliefs. We include practical tools for programs and early childhood professionals to increase their ability to better meet the needs of young children who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). To provide a context for the strategies, self-efficacy and culturally responsive practices are described in more detail in the following sections.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief that they are able to complete a specific task in a certain moment/situation. According to researchers, *self-efficacy* is an essential belief that influences a person's willingness to engage in specific activities, cognitive functioning, and efficacy in specific task performance (Bandura, 1989; Margolis & McCabe, 2004; Schunk, 2020). Self-efficacy beliefs influence people's motivation and support self-regulatory behaviors. Bandura explains that educators' self-efficacy impacts student outcomes because "...they believe that difficult students are teachable through extra effort and appropriate techniques" (1997, p. 241). Educators with high self-efficacy have higher motivation and a lower burnout rate compared to their colleagues with lower self-efficacy (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Schunk, 2020). Educators with higher classroom management self-efficacy are more successful

in supporting their students to demonstrate socially appropriate behaviors and maintain on-task behavior in the classroom (Almog & Shechtman, 2007; Siwatu et al., 2017), while those with low self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to exhibit negative reactions and punishment for student behavior (Gordon, 2001).

Early childhood providers' sense of self-efficacy has been associated with higher quality of instructions, increased child performance (Guo et al., 2021), and increased work engagement for providers (Lipscomb et al., 2021). Furthermore, early childhood professionals' self-efficacy beliefs were predictors of children's progress in literacy and gains in language development (Guo et al., 2021). Research conducted by Guo and colleagues (2021) on factors related to preschool teachers' self-efficacy demonstrated that early childhood providers' self-efficacy was associated with their sense of community and collaboration with colleagues. Furthermore, findings demonstrated that children's engagement predicted educator self-efficacy, as educators felt more confident and competent when their students were actively engaged and focused on learning (Guo et al., 2021). Research has also underscored the variation in educators' beliefs regarding self-efficacy with children, depending on the children's characteristics, behaviors, and disability status (Guo et al., 2014; Sawyer et al., 2020). Overall, research shows early childhood providers' self-efficacy is important for child and teacher success.

Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a set of practices that are developed and implemented to build a bridge between academic content and real-world experiences, through acknowledging and using cultural characteristics, language, background, experiences, and diverse perspectives of students in the classroom (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive pedagogy is responsive to cultural and linguistic diversity. Culturally responsive pedagogy is not just teaching, it is also advocating for social justice and human rights of students from diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2000; Gay, 2013).

Research has indicated that professionals' implementation of CRT in the classroom promotes higher academic performance and overall success at school for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Cruz et al., 2019). Culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy (CRTSE) is an educator's perception of their effectiveness, regarding their ability to perform culturally responsive teaching practice effectively, leading to positive outcomes among their students (Siwatu et al., 2017). Siwatu and colleagues (2017) reported that preservice professionals who had high self-efficacy related to making their students feel valued and respected in the classroom also believed it was extremely important to build a relationship of trust with students to promote their learning and development. However, participants in this study also demonstrated low self-efficacy in building relationship by relating to specific cultural elements such as learning some words in a student's native language or learning about some cultural traditions (Siwatu et al., 2017).

Increasing Educators' Self-Efficacy in CRT Through Professional Development

In order to support an educator's self-efficacy beliefs it is important that teachers have mastery experiences that include successful and positive experiences (Bandura, 1977). The following strategies used in the classroom will support providers in attaining these positive experiences, which will build their self-efficacy in teaching a culturally and linguistically diverse population of students.

Research indicates that training and supports available to providers in early childhood environments are often insufficient (Odom et al., 2012). Professional development opportunities can support educators in developing and sustaining culturally sensitive practices. Professional development has an important role in supporting providers' understanding of the importance of CRT, increasing their knowledge about CRT and self-efficacy in delivering

CRT practices (Bautista, 2011; Cruz et al., 2019). Comprehensive training on culturally responsive practices for educators has been associated with their positive attitude toward teaching children from diverse backgrounds (Fitchett, Starker, & Salyers, 2012). Moreover, Frye et al. (2010) found that preservice teachers' self-efficacy towards CRT increased significantly over a one semester method course in culturally responsive pedagogy and ways to implement it effectively in the classroom. This understanding is essential and a foundational step for increasing self-efficacy in this area. Similar experiences can be provided in professional development activities for practicing teachers.

Strategies for Increasing Self-Efficacy in Culturally Responsive Practices

Research has demonstrated that early childhood providers who have strong collaboration with colleagues report higher self-efficacy beliefs (Guo et al., 2021). This further supports the need for building strong community at early childhood centers and encouraging collaboration between novice and experienced professionals. Research has demonstrated that in order to provide culturally responsive instruction in the classroom, teachers should: use children's cultural experience and prior knowledge to facilitate the learning process and collaboration; incorporate students' cultures to design the classroom environment; and allow students to demonstrate their learning through various culturally sensitive assessments and methods (Siwatu, 2017; Durden et al., 2015). However, to do this, educators need to develop their own self-efficacy in this area. The following sections include essential elements to foster the development of self-efficacy.

Empathy and perspective taking. Providers with high self-efficacy in culturally responsive practices demonstrate warmth and care to students, and prioritize building positive relationships with children in order to support their growth and development (Frye et al., 2010). A caring educator delivers instructions in a way that

supports students in connecting their past experiences, knowledge and culture to the new material (Bennett, 2007). Empathic providers can better understand and support students from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Empathy bridges what the provider knows about the students' backgrounds to the actions needed to plan the learning experience and address students' needs (Warren, 2018). This perspective taking is a core element of empathy, as it encourages educators to "think outside of the box," broadening their knowledge in CRT through viewing situations from another person's and/or culture's point of view. Perspective taking can support educator implementation of a variety of classroom strategies to improve the quality of student-teacher interactions and bolster students' academic and social performance (Warren, 2018). Teachers' use of caring, empathy and perspective taking can support children feeling more respected and valued, and may also increase their motivation and involvement in the learning process.

Community building. One of the first steps to create a culturally responsive classroom and increase early childhood providers' self-efficacy in culturally responsive teaching is to build a positive learning community, where all children feel welcomed and supported. Educators need to create an environment where students feel safe to ask questions, share ideas, and talk about their cultures and backgrounds. It is important to know the contribution of diverse ethnic groups to different subject areas or units covered, and to share this information with young learners (Gay, 2013). Culturally responsive professionals encourage students to learn about their heritage, and also about cultures and contributions of other ethnic groups (Gay, 2001). In this way all students in the classroom feel respected and included, which supports the opportunity to learn and function in an inclusive culturally diverse environment. Some simple strategies to use to build a culturally diverse learning community follow.

1. Learn students' names and make the effort to pronounce them correctly. It is the first thing teachers can do to show respect to children, their families, and their cultures. In many cultures names have certain symbolic meaning, and mispronunciation may diminish the meaning of the name (Krasnoff, 2016).

2. Be sensitive to cultural norms and differences. For example, in some cultures eye-contact with adults might be seen disrespectful and, as such, it might be uncomfortable for children to use eye-contact with their teachers. Therefore, professionals should be mindful about cultural differences among children from CLD backgrounds while teaching and setting behavioral expectations in their classrooms.

3. Increase knowledge about cultures different from your own. The concept of culture incorporates many elements, and some of them have direct implications on teaching and learning. According to Gay (2013) educators need to know: a) whether students' cultures are collective or individual in orientation, and how that may influence task performance and knowledge acquisition; b) the cultural norms related to interactions between children and adults and how that might look different in the school setting; and c) the implication of gender roles across ethnic groups. Examples of each include first, that students from collective cultural orientations may experience more difficulties working individually than the students from individual orientations. Also, in some cultures children are not allowed to make eye contact with adults or ask questions without permission. Finally, in some cultures, girls are encouraged to be shy and silent, which may influence their social and academic performance in school. Knowledge of these essential components can be used to enhance culturally responsive practices and increase teachers' self-efficacy in CRT.

4. Collaborate with children and their families. Obtaining information through reading books or articles should not be the sole method of learning about cultures. The best approach to learn about children's heritage and background is to actively commu-

nicate and collaborate with children and their families (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Active and positive teacher/parent communication can improve the school performance of children from CLD backgrounds and serves as an important component for building a strong learning community at school (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). Providers should use a variety of methods for communicating with parents such as parent-teacher conferences, emails, mail, phone calls, messages through the school communication system, and home visits. Moreover, children and their families should be invited to participate in cultural events at school to present their culture to other students, parents, and preschool professionals, to promote intercultural communication and knowledge exchange. Professionals are encouraged to be open with families and ask questions about their culture, heritage, and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, partnerships can be formed with culturally diverse community members as they can be invited to the classroom as guest speakers or volunteers to teach and present about different cultures (Durden et al., 2015).

Building Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Practices

Teachers should use the information they learn about culturally responsive practices when creating their plans for managing their classroom. Overall, classroom management techniques include practices that are used to create a positive learning environment in the classroom. Establishing high expectations, monitoring students' progress and behavior, and responding to children's needs are some practices used to ensure successful classroom management (Pas et al., 2015). Effective classroom management practices have been associated with positive child outcomes including academic success, decreased problematic behaviors, increased attention and involvement, more positive relationships between teachers and peers (Pas et al., 2015).

Visual Supports. As a part of effective and responsive cultural classroom management in early childhood settings, visual aids, bulletin boards, and displays should reflect children's racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The presence of relevant cultural pictures, artwork, artifacts, and materials supports an inclusive environment where cultures are acknowledged and respected (Krasnoff, 2016). Furthermore, displaying some words in students' native languages in the classroom benefits both all children, as all learn about cross-cultural literacy and phonemic differences. Lastly, offering children toys, puzzles and books that represent various ages, races, genders, languages, and cultures will support the creation of inclusive and diverse environments in early childhood settings.

Culturally relevant curriculum. The instructional materials and curriculum should incorporate multicultural perspectives to be accessible and educational for diverse learners. The texts, visual illustrations, and learning activities should be designed in a way that makes sense for all children in the classroom. Specifically, culturally responsive teachers use texts, images, and artifacts, which represent various cultures and relate to diverse students in the classroom (Gay, 2013). In addition, teachers can create a representative, authentic environment where young children can speak, touch, see, taste, and feel their culture and the cultures of their peers (Durdin et al., 2014). Children can participate more fully in their classroom when the curriculum and classroom fully includes them.

Classroom arrangement. The teachers are encouraged to arrange desks in the classroom in order to increase interaction and interpersonal relationships. All children should feel that they belong in the classroom even when they are new to the country or to the school. Collaboration among students, and between students and teachers, can create a sense of connection and community (Shade et al., 2004). Moreover, to increase communication and collaboration among children from different cultural groups, teachers can incorporate group projects, peer-mediated instructions, social groups, and peer buddy programs in the classroom (Shade et al., 2004).

Set students up for success. Early childhood educators should communicate genuine care about all students in their classroom, as well as the belief that students from diverse backgrounds have high intellectual potential and are able to achieve academically and socially. It is important to set students up for success early in their life, while making sure the behaviors needed for success are culturally appropriate and that students are specifically reminded of the behavior expectations. Two evidence-based practices, designed to address and prevent children's challenging behaviors as well as to improve provider's self-efficacy beliefs through supportive, positive classroom environments, include precorrection and behavior specific praise.

Precorrection is an evidence-based strategy that fits the needs of diverse students and can be used across all early childhood settings (see, for example, Stormont & Reinke, 2014). When using precorrection with their students, teachers remind children of behavior expectations when transitioning to a new activity or setting. Precorrection should be used after the specific behavior expectations have been taught (Stormont & Reinke, 2014). Precorrection can be a tool for preventing undesired behavior in situations that are likely to cause children difficulty within their daily routines (e.g., transitioning to a different activity, setting up one's workplace, beginning a peer or small group activity; Green & Stormont, 2017). After providing precorrective statements, behavior-specific praise (BSP) should be used as a positive consequence for the desired behavior exhibited by children (Green & Stormont, 2017). BSP is an individualized, specific, and verbal statement immediately following children's desired behavior (e.g., "David is walking quietly to the carpet with his hands by his side-nice job!"). For most children this feedback and positive attention serves as a positive reinforcer and it increases the child's use of that specific desired behavior again in the future.

Continue to Learn

Reflecting on personal cultural backgrounds and acknowledging biases are critical processes for building culturally responsive classrooms (Durden et al., 2015). As educators recognize and overcome their own personal biases, they lessen the negative impact of biases on the way they communicate and interact with students and their parents. Early childhood providers should spend time in self-reflection on their biases and how they may affect their behavior in the classroom (Durden et al., 2015). Conversations with colleagues and administration about the importance of culturally responsive practices at early childhood centers, including the positive effects and need for equity for all students, are important to promote a culturally diverse positive learning environment in preschool. In addition, reflection on the current level of implementation of culturally sensitive practices in the classroom will help educators to plan for improvement and set appropriate goals.

Setting specific goals to address teaching difficulties is one of the successful strategies to increase early childhood providers' confidence and effective teaching (Browne & Gordon, 2016). Goal setting includes the cognitive process of making decisions of what tasks/problems to prioritize, and what steps to take to attain those goals. Goal setting consequently enhances commitment to the goal, self-efficacy beliefs, and overall task performance (Browne & Gordon, 2016). For this reason, all educators are highly encouraged to develop specific short-term and long-term goals for improving their CRT practices and increasing their self-efficacy beliefs. Goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound.

There is a clear need to create positive early learning environments, which support culturally responsive teaching. When young children are taught based on their individuality and culture, their classroom engagement will likely increase (Durden et al., 2014). This article has described strategies to support young children from diverse cultural backgrounds and increase teachers' self-efficacy in culturally responsive practices.

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