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## ESL Teachers and School Leaders Perspectives: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Elementary and Middle Grades Social Studies

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## **ESL Teachers and School Leaders Perspectives: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Elementary and Middle Grades Social Studies**

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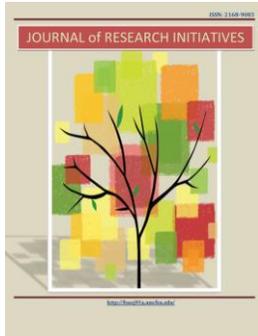
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## **ESL Teachers and School Leaders Perspectives: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Elementary and Middle Grades Social Studies**

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### **Abstract**

The American public education system is undergoing significant changes. This is regarding what students should be learning and how teachers should deliver quality instruction. English language learners (ELLs) are a group that demands time, attention, and special consideration. This is due to their increasing population in public schools and their low academic performance when compared to their native English-speaking students (Samson & Collins, 2012). English language learners are one of the fastest-growing student populations in the United States, with over 4.6 million students as of 2015 (McFarland et al., 2017). This qualitative with a narrative inquiry approach aimed to explore ESL teachers' and school leaders' perspectives of culturally relevant pedagogy. This study sought to answer the following guiding research question: What are ESL teachers' and school leaders' perspectives of best practices for creating a culturally responsive and inclusive curriculum to find relevant connections among English language learners in K-8 social studies? This method allowed for stories to be gathered through many different forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents.

Participants shared personal experiences in their profession as an ESL teacher or school leader found in single or multiple episodes and private situations. Interviewing was the primary method of data collection. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed by a third party. The research question was answered through a series of open-ended interview questions. Coding and theming analysis were used to determine commonalities among participant responses.

Overwhelming, 21 of 24 participants in this study communicated that cultural and language barriers are the greatest challenges in providing instruction for English language learners. In addition, over 21 of 24 participants in this study indicated that culturally responsive teaching as a best practice towards meeting the needs of English language learners in K-8 social studies content. Findings indicated that there is a need for ESL teachers and school leaders to receive

more quality research- based professional development and support. In addition, a need to implement culturally relevant pedagogy within instruction of social studies. This is to meet the needs of English language learners.

### **Introduction**

The United States in many areas have adopted and implemented Common Core State Standards for grade levels K-12 public schools. These revisions to educational policies and legislation are reflective of the priorities established by the United States Department of Education during the Obama administration for *Race to the Top*, and the reauthorization of *No Child Left Behind*, now known as *Every Student Succeeds Acts* (ESSA). These revisions have consisted of the following: (1) adoption of new standards and assessments to prepare students with college and career readiness skills, (2) creation of a system to measure student growth and success allowing teachers and principals information to assist with improving instruction, (3) recruitment, development, compensation, and retention of effective educators, and (4) the establishment of strategies to turnaround of low performing schools.

Samson and Collins (2012) emphasized that there would be assessments for Local Education Agencies (LEAs). This is to seek to improve academic performance for English language learners as to whether teachers are committed to leaving no child behind. These revisions would grant opportunities for implementing initiatives to address educational needs for at-risk students. Unfortunately, researchers have questioned whether teachers are prepared to effectively address the needs of a culturally diverse population within classroom settings and environments (Heafner & Plaisance, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to discover ESL teachers and school leaders' perspectives in meeting the needs of English language learners in elementary and middle grades social studies.

### **Literature Review**

Research has found that more than half of social studies teachers have ELLs in their classes (Jimenez-Silva, Hinde, & Hernandez, 2013); however, it also tells us that social studies teachers report feeling unprepared to teach ELLs (Cho & Reich, 2008; O'Brien, 2009, 2011). Social studies within the national education policy context remain absent (Yoder, Kibler, & van Hover, 2016). There are not clear or consistent mandates that provide the level of financial support and guidance for social studies content for educators working with ELLs (Heafner & Plaisance, 2016). No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation, Race to the Top (United States

Department of Education, 2009), and the more recent Common Core State Standards movement do not single out social studies in the same manner as math, reading, English language arts, and science. STEM incentives solidify notions of sacred content and reinforce the elusive status for social studies.

Even though efforts have been made by national social studies organizations to elevate the discipline's standing, state, and local priorities are driven by formalized policies and funding directives. Amidst an entrenched testing culture and the prevalence of associated remediation demands, trends suggest that non-tested subjects compete for importance, scramble for instructional time, and are forced to grapple with secondary status (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Lazarin, 2014). Thus, non-tested subjects, like social studies, are often relegated to the sidelines of the elementary school curriculum (An, 2009; VanFossen, 2005; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). The marginalization and absence of social studies instruction is particularly problematic for English language learners in American schools. English language learners often lack "a working knowledge of American culture that can serve as a schema for new social learning" (Cruz & Thornton, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, this makes the opportunity to gain experience social studies more crucial. Social studies as a content area has the distinct purpose of developing well-informed, active, responsible, critical thinking, and engaged citizens. It ensures that students are well versed in discipline literacies, academic language, and unique ways of knowing.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies, (2013) it is evident that college, career, and civic life readiness are the cornerstone of social studies curricula. This represents goals that are equally important to English language learners. Social studies content focuses on "democratic values and their importance for personal, social, and civic decision making" (McGuire, 2007, p. 621). Yet, educational policies and associated accountability pressures, which encompasses teacher training and textbooks, have shifted the balance from civic and citizenship preparation to an academically narrow curriculum (Levine, Lopez, & Marcelo, 2008). Furthermore, the absence of social studies instruction for a growing ELL population poses serious concerns considering research examining the relationship between social studies instructional and political behaviors, such as electoral engagement and civic participation, among older immigrant youth (Callahan, Muller, & Schiller, 2008, 2010, & Yoder, Kibler, & van Hover, 2016).

English language learners' perspectives of social studies are affected by their cultural

contexts. Almarza (2001) investigated the perspectives and understanding of United States' history among Mexican American middle school students in Nebraska. Almarza (2001) similarly contended that the teaching and learning of history did not take place in a vacuum.

There were multiple and competing contexts that impacted how teachers facilitated instruction and what students' cultures and thoughts about the content and instruction of social studies (Heafner & Plaisance, 2016 & Almarza, 2001). In comparison, a study was conducted by Compton (2018) six teachers who participated in the survey of their personal experiences with instructing ELLs in their classroom. This study thoroughly examined the literature on policy, programming, and culturally responsive teaching and how these may influence achievement in the mainstream classroom for ELLs. The cross-analysis of the survey and interview data uncovered responses related to the themes: inclusion, instructional practice, support, and access to culturally responsive teaching. This study concludes by providing implications for schools, classrooms, and teachers on how to create an inclusive learning environment through the effective mainstreaming of English language learners that acknowledges the experiences and culture of each student (Compton, 2018).

In their meta-synthesis of effective teaching practices for English language learners, Téllez and Waxman (2006) identify "building on prior knowledge" whereby "teachers work to connect students' lives to school themes" as an effective "instructional orientation" (p. 245). Likewise, Janzen (2008) concludes her review of the literature on teaching ELLs by stating: "there is a consensus that who students are must be acknowledged and valued in effective teaching practice" (pp. 1030-1031). Such understandings map onto Grant's (2003) notions of ambitious teaching and learning in social studies classrooms, as well as literature from the field of multicultural education (e.g., Banks & Nguyen, 2008; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2013). In sum, culturally responsive instruction provides an important approach through which to make connections for ELLs given the "differences in students' linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds" (Lee, 2010, p. 453).

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2010) originated from research facilitated on the educational disparities of racial minority students in American public schools. Culturally relevant pedagogues argued for the importance of inclusive education to make social studies learning experience more relevant and meaningful to those students. This is defined as an instructional approach to recognize, tap into, and build on those students' home

cultural knowledge. This encompasses prior learning, and familiar points of reference. Culturally relevant pedagogy is delineated by three major teaching applications: (1) teachers' investigation of students' prior knowledge, (2) teachers' recognition and inclusion of students' prior knowledge and voices in their curriculum and instruction; and (3) teachers' adjustment made during the teaching process to engage and motivate students to participate in the learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research findings have shown that when ESL teachers and public-school leaders utilize culturally relevant pedagogy, students respond positively and engage actively in the learning process (Choi, 2013; Irizarry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012; Ramirez & Jaffee, 2016).

In addition, the linguistically responsive teaching research literature overlaps and complements the culturally relevant pedagogy research in a significant and meaningful way. There is an increasing number of English language learners entering public schools (NCES, 2019). Culturally relevant pedagogy has expanded its application to educating English language learners to enhance their academic achievement (An, 2009; Choi, 2013; Duff, 2001; Irizarry, 2007; Ramirez & Jaffee, 2016; Szpara & Ahmad, 2007). Based on the principles, processes of second language acquisition (SLA) and effective ESL teaching best practices, scholars in this line of research have identified major aspects of effective social studies instruction for English language learners (Cruz & Thornton, 2009; Cummins, 1986; Jaffee, 2016; Lucas & Villegas, 2010).

English language learners face additional challenges in social studies classes. Not only are English language learners home cultures and life experiences often not shared by ESL teachers and school leaders, but also what they are asked to read, write, and discuss is routinely foreign to them (Jaffee, 2016). Even at times, instruction or teaching styles may go against English language learners' previous cultural beliefs, traditions, and expectations (Compton, 2018). Furthermore, their limited English proficiency places them at a disadvantage when compared to their native English-speaking peers. Thus, this compounds the challenges English language learners face in their social studies learning (Cruz & Thornton, 2013; Cummins, 1986; Duff, 2001; Jaffee, 2016; Lucas & Villegas, 2010).

Researchers have identified the following objectives of culturally relevant pedagogy and responsive linguistic teaching: (1) sends a clear message that what English language learners

bring to the social studies class is not only a valid but an important resource for learning, (2) provides language support and being knowledgeable about those students' second language developmental stages, characteristics, and needs, (3) builds disciplinary language and literacy skills into the lesson by explicitly teaching the language functions, vocabulary, discourse patterns used in the social studies texts, (4) taps into English language learners native language, culture, literacy skills, and styles of learning and allows English language learners to use their native language when they are limited in using English to express their intelligence and thoughts, (5) teachers learning about English language learners cultural backgrounds and culturally familiar referents and uses them to bridge the social studies content presented in class, and (6) uses comparisons and contrasts to analyze different historical narratives, perspectives and enrich the social studies curriculum and develop critical learners (Choi, 2013; Irizarry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2012; Ramirez & Jaffee, 2016). Social studies as a content area that heavily relies on literacy skills, which has its own unique linguistic features that do not often appear in other subject areas (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006).

ESL pedagogy practices that exclusively rely on the English teachers or the ESL teachers outside of the social studies classroom may not provide enough academic assistance in social studies. Focusing on the academic language is shown by research as an effective pedagogy to educate English language learners in content area classrooms (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2012). Teaching academic language strategies aims to unite content learning and literacy development (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2012). By focusing on academic language through language analysis questions and activities, ESL teachers can help students to gain a deeper understanding of the content. The focus on academic language focused approach does not decrease the linguistic complexity of texts, nor does it decrease cognitive demands involved in the content learning (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2012).

On the contrary, it provides a linguistic scaffolding for the purpose of content mastery. Academic language-focused strategies and approaches go beyond vocabulary instruction. They focus on the syntactic, semantic, and functional discourse levels of the text (Heritage, Walqui, & Linquanti, 2015). ESL teachers and school leaders are encouraged to work with language experts to design language-focused activities to enhance English language learners reading

comprehension and language development (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2012).

The rationale of this study was to contribute to the knowledge base on the teaching and learning of K-8 social studies among culturally and linguistically diverse students, most notably English language learners. The need for empirical research that bridges the fields of social studies education, and second language acquisition has been well documented (Amaral & Garrison, 2007; Janzen, 2008; O'Brien, 2012; Yoder et al., 2016). The perspectives of ESL teachers and school leaders are particularly needed, given the evidence that these students struggle in comprehending the traditional historical and civic narrative of progress and freedom (Almarza, 2001; Busey, 2013; Cho, 2011; Epstein, 2000, 2009; Peck, 2010) and the lived experience of immigration impacts student perspectives in this content (An, 2009; Cho, 2011; Levy, 2014; Peck, 2010).

Few studies have examined the experiences and perspectives of ESL teachers and school leaders establishing educational environments for the purpose of ensuring English language learners are performing successfully in K-8 social studies content. As such, the present study has the potential to contribute to the theoretical understanding of how the interplay between language and identity may impact the learning of history among culturally and linguistically diverse student populations.

This encompassed examining strategies and best practices to better ensure the academic growth of English language learners in social studies. The responses from teachers and school leaders evaluating their perspectives with English language learners pertaining to classroom cultural components may aid them in providing more conducive learning environments for these students. The findings from this study can offer meaningful data to educational practitioners for professional development, resources, and support needed for English language learners within elementary and middle public schools.

### **Research Question**

What are ESL teachers and school leaders' attitudes toward their professional development and educational resources to meet the linguistic and cultural educational needs of English language learners in K-8 social studies?

### **Method**

A qualitative methodology using a narrative inquiry approach was selected for the

research design. In qualitative inquiry, the research is based upon real-world observations, emerging from the interplay of the researcher's experiences, tacit theories, diverse interests in practice, and developing scholarly interests (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Anchored with a background in education and a desire to grasp an understanding of how ESL teachers and public schools perceive preparing students in elementary and middle grades social studies content, the researcher concluded that a qualitative method was most suitable. Through narrative research inquiry, this study explored individuals' experiences to understand how they shed light on the identities of their perspectives of their roles as ESL teachers and public-school leaders. This method allowed for stories to be gathered through structured interviews. Participants shared personal experiences in their profession as an ESL teacher or public-school leaders found in single or multiple episodes and private situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Participants**

The target population consisted of ESL teachers, instructional coaches, administrators, assistant principals, principals, and department coordinators from the Sandhills region of the state of North Carolina. There were two specific standards for the school districts to be considered. Firstly, the instructional and administrative staff must have worked and engaged with English language learners in a public-school setting. Secondly, since the primary objective of this study was to illuminate the ESL teachers and public-school leaders' perspectives of K-8 social studies, it was imperative for the school district to represent a variety of districts with a high concentration of students who were classified as English language learners. Likewise, the criteria to select participants was twofold. Inasmuch as the state of North Carolina requires teachers and public-school leaders to hold a teaching license for this study, it was important that participants began their careers in the district with classroom instruction. Additionally, it was required for them to have or presently be providing support for English language learners. Not only do these criteria parallel that of the researcher, but it also afforded an opportunity for the participants to collectively have a variety of diverse interactions and experiences within the same region.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants for this qualitative study. The rationale related to purposeful sampling is to significantly increase the measure of understanding of the phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The inclusion criteria for this study consisted of teachers and school leaders of ESL students in K-8 public school districts that represent

diverse cultures, ethnicities, and levels of experience with the public school system. This technique was adopted as it sufficiently addressed and aligned with the research questions, literature review, time frame of the study, and availability of resources. The researcher determined a sample size of 24 participants was sufficient to meet this objective.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Research interviews served as the main source of data collection for this qualitative study. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews are the most utilized data collection method for qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants were employed in public school districts located in the Sandhills region of North Carolina. The researcher traveled to each school district to facilitate and record interviews. All interviews were conducted live and in person. Each participant was interviewed one time, and the interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a transcription program in its entirety. The interviewer then carefully assigned the following predetermined codes to participant transcripts: Participants 1-24. The researcher collaborated with another education professional to determine the accuracy of the transcribed answers by comparing audio recordings to written transcripts. This was done to ensure an accurate analysis of the transcripts and to reduce researcher bias. The transcriptions were sent to each participant for review to ensure member checking protocol was followed (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). The researcher, when appropriate, chose to restate questions and summarize answers during each interview to maintain flow and consistency (Noble & Smith, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were pre-scheduled with each ESL teachers and school leaders. Several data collection techniques were utilized. These techniques included: the perceptions gathered from the interviews, the consent form from each school district, and the participant's demographic information consisting of questions within a questionnaire. All interviews were recorded, and the participants were informed of this fact through letter and email. This process allowed the researcher to obtain additional information. Member checking was conducted through email, allowing participants to confirm or dispute recorded information. Participants were notified that they had the right to decline to participate at any time during the interview process.

The following steps were utilized in conducting this study: (1) this study utilized a

qualitative research design, (2) the researcher obtained permission to facilitate research protocol, (3) the researcher sent letters and emails to inviting ESL teachers and school leaders to participate in the study, (4) after agreeing to participate in the research study, the researcher emailed the consent letter, purpose of the study, and research questions to those who agreed to participate, (5) the researcher contacted each participant to schedule a time to be interviewed face to face and confirmed via email response, (6) the researcher will email the interview questions for the convenience of each participant, (7) participants were asked to email the demographic information before the scheduled interview, (8) each face-to-face interview was audio recorded and took approximately 45-60 minutes to complete, (9) all participants were asked to respond to the open-ended interview questions, (10) the researcher communicated in a room alone while interviewing participants, (11) participants' narrative responses were transcribed into textual data and (12) after completion of the textual data, the researcher emailed participants their responses to check for accuracy in interpretation of perspectives.

Rich, thick, and detailed descriptions of the summaries were coded using content and thematic analysis based of the literature and guided by the theoretical framework. Content analysis is viewed as a subjective interpretation of various classifications that identify relationships and patterns in the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Special attention was specifically assigned to various key words and concepts that were then arranged according to categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thematic analysis further examined these categories for emergent themes (Vaismoradi, Turnunen, & Bondas, 2013). Once emergent themes were identified, the text was then uploaded into a software program designed to manage and organize qualitative data (QRS International, 2017).

### **Validation and Evaluation/Credibility and Trustworthiness**

It is clear one should be able to demonstrate that their study measures what it is designed to measure (Bashir, Afzal, & Azeem, 2008; Carcary, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000). This aspect is known as validity and reliability. Bashir et al. (2008) defined this process as, "The extent to which the data is plausible, credible, and trustworthy" (p. 44). Three measures were adopted to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Firstly, method used was data triangulation (Carcary, 2009; Lietz & Zayas, 2010). This method converged data across the different sources, which supported the emergent themes and to corroborated experiences (Carcary, 2009; Shenton, 2004). Secondly, the strategy that was employed to ensure validity was member checking.

Accurate representation in the transcription of the study participant's words was integral to the authentic data analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lastly, the self-disclosure of researcher bias was employed as an acceptable method to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2008; Fossey et al., 2002; Ponterotto, 2005).

## **Results and Discussion**

This qualitative study was conducted with 24 participants consisting of ESL teachers and public-school leaders in four selected school districts in North Carolina. These educators and leaders representing diverse genders, cultures, ethnicities, and levels of experience with the public school system. In addition, these ESL teachers and school leaders work collaboratively together with English language learners. The participants shared their unified perspectives of working with English language learners in elementary and middle grades settings.

### **Cultural and Language Barriers**

Most participants in this study communicated that cultural and language barriers are the greatest challenges in providing instruction for English language learners. ESL teachers and school leaders stated that often these challenges are reciprocal for educators, administrators, students, and families of these learners. Many respondents communicated that this challenge correlates with their achievement and often biases that have been projected on English language learners.

#### **Participant 1**

And, and having a buddy, but, um, they do not ... sometimes they do not understand ... to me, they do not understand some of the, um ... regarding culture, like, just the ... the routines and day to day things that happen, cause ... because they may be different where they are from.

#### **Participant 2**

Sure. Um, well you know there is not a lot we try and bring in, you know, materials that, that are inter- are of interest to the kids. That fit the kids needs and, and there may not necessarily be that mindset of, let us try and bring in something that gonna fit these ELL students. Um, a- and so we need to be cognizant of bringing that in and that also then makes their, their culture more mainstream to other students as well.

#### **Participant 3**

Well, there are so many kinds of languages and barriers, for example, this past year we

had students from the Middle East and the boys in the classroom were very domineering and would almost put down the girls in that setting. And so, um (Teacher S) really worked hard with those students because you know they have that cultural background where girls are not equal to the males. And so, she had to really work hard with those boys to see that this is America, and this is how we handle it here and this is what is acceptable. Umm, so there is just a lot of different challenges culturally that you are gonna find even with certain Hispanic... Umm you know all Hispanics are not the same, you have got Mexicans, you've got Puerto Ricans, you've got Cubans, you've got people from Spain, Brazil, you've got lots of difference cultures of Spanish-speaking people and their cultures are very different. And so, a lot of times you know people will assume that just because you speak Spanish, you must be Mexican, you must like tacos, or you must love this. So, it is very offensive you know to Puerto Ricans to say that to them about Mexican culture because it is very different. So, umm some of the culture barriers are as simple as food. Some of them are as simple as umm.... facial expressions and looking you in the eye when you talk. A lot of times you are taught not supposed to look people in the eyes. Umm so, it is just a lot of different things culturally that you must make sure that they understand as they are coming into this new environment.

#### **Participant 4**

They may not understand our culture. They are coming from different countries; their culture might be ... our culture might be strange to them. Some of our mannerisms and how we interact with one another could be very strange, and even some of the content that they are learning could be challenging to them as well, especially when they do not have that knowledge of the English language. That makes it hard for them to grasp some of the cultures and some of the concepts they are being taught.

A vast majority of participants in this study stated that cultural and language barriers was the main unique challenge in teaching English language learners. ESL teachers and school leaders in this study believed cultural and language barriers was a major hindrance and obstacle for them in working with English language learners in elementary and middle school settings. This finding supports Zacarian's (2012), study which relayed there are deficiencies in the cultural, linguistic, and background experiences between the ELL population and their facilitators of learning. There includes even a lack of teacher knowledge and competency

regarding pedagogy of English language learners through teacher preparation programs. According to (Jaffee, 2016), not only are English language learners home cultures and life experiences often not shared by ESL teachers and school leaders but also what they are asked to read, write, and discuss is routinely foreign to them. Even at times instruction or teaching styles may go against English language learners' previous cultural beliefs, traditions, and expectations. Furthermore, their limited English proficiency places them at a disadvantage when compared to their native English-speaking peers. Thus, this compounds the challenges English language learners face in their social studies learning (Beck, 2008; Cruz & Thornton, 2013; Cummins, 1986; Duff, 2001; Jaffee, 2016; Lucas & Villegas, 2010).

ESL teachers and school leaders expressed that specifically these barriers are formed due to the lack of training and professional development offered within the school district. Respondents expressed that cultural and language barriers impact their achievement in the mainstream, especially social studies content. Some school leaders expressed even within higher education they receive little to no guidance on how to support the social cultural and linguistic needs of English language learners.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Participants in this study indicated that culturally responsive teaching as a best practice towards meeting the needs of English language learners in K-8 social studies content. According to ESL teachers and school leaders, a culturally responsive approach to teaching addresses these learners physically, socially, mentally, and emotionally. ESL teachers and school leaders expressed that this approach has yielded success in the classroom for English language learners. They stressed the importance of this approach through effectiveness in recognizing and acknowledge multiculturalism in developing lessons, units, and curriculum.

### **Participant 2**

Well, I think, um, no matter what our role is in the school, it is important to, to bring in global education to, to the classroom kids. The need to be aware that there is a world outside of their hometown, outside of their home state, and how it is going to affect them. Um, ESL students, it is important to encourage them to hold onto to their, to their home culture. Um, I know that a lot of times they are being told, you know, assimilate. Y - you know, they need to assimilate. They need to learn English.

They need to do these things to fit into our culture, but their culture's important too. And I

think they need that encouragement to keep that. Especially people who- you know, ESL learners that have that, that Spanish language and then can bring the English in to, to be you know, bilingual is so, so marketable and so important in our country today. So, that is important.

### **Participant 3**

Umm, one of the ways is just by having separate class where they go in, (Teacher S) of course teaches them not just language skills but culture and what is acceptable, you know what is not acceptable. So, we are very fortunate to have (Teacher S). I am sure this new woman's gonna be great but (Teacher S) was one of the best ELL teachers with which I have worked. She has done a really good job at making sure that students not only understood the language but the culture as well. Just having the class alone is a benefit for them.

### **Participant 4**

Providing parents with support, the students of course, as well. When they have questions or concerns, I am always trying to find someone who can speak their language. Also support the ESL teacher that is here, as far as their needs, knowing their background and different things that I know in their family lives, I will share them with the ESL teachers. Also, with accommodating teachers that assist with that stuff to let them know that I support them and give them any type of resources they may need, as far as supporting the families and the children.

### **Participant 5**

Like on all teachers' evaluation there is a piece about diverse learners and culture, so that is one way to have teachers be aware of that aspect that, you know, they need to be aware of. You know, our county does offer some culture classes; I provide PD on culture so, it varies from school to school.

A vast majority of participants in this study indicated that culturally responsive teaching as a best practice towards meeting the needs of English language learners in elementary and middle grades social studies content. ESL teachers and school leaders viewed this form of teaching best practice as critical to ensuring English language learners' success in social studies content. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2010) originated from research facilitated on the educational disparities of racial minority students. This form of

teaching emphasizes the importance of inclusive education to make social studies learning experience more relevant and meaningful to those students. It is as an instructional approach to recognize, tap into, and build on those students' home cultural knowledge, which encompasses prior learning, and familiar points of reference. According to Gay (2002) a teacher's ability to contribute "cultural scaffolding" necessitates that educators must have more than a generic cultural comprehension of similarities and differences (p. 11).

He stressed these important areas of focus for English language learners within cultural differences are: (a) English language learners bring an educational background from their native country, and (b) prior learning experiences which serve to build relationships with English language learners who in turn develop a sense of worth within the classroom. The many diverse cultures from which English language learners perceive educators as the final authority and questioning is viewed as dishonorable and disrespectful (Gay, 2000). This study aligns with the data collected by respondents in this study.

ESL teachers and school leaders expressed that resources and collaboration ensured that culturally responsive teaching is implemented across all content. Respondents for multiple school districts indicated that there are different methods to infuse culturally responsive pedagogy such as English language learner's home culture and environment. Culturally responsive teaching is what has been a major aim of school settings to focus on as it aligns with the professional teaching standards and evaluations.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, implications for change include an increased emphasis on mainstream teachers and school leaders receiving training on best practices for teaching ESL students and cultural awareness. School districts should implement and focus on culturally relevant pedagogy to address the needs of these students. Additional support could be provided to ESL teachers and school leaders in reaching English language learners in elementary and middle grades social studies content by increasing the opportunities to collaborate with mainstream teachers on lesson and unit planning. There should also be a focus and resources provided to implement these changes to provide a sense of stability and consistency for English language learners to succeed. Educational learning environments need to be facilitated that are positive and conducive for English language learners. This can be accomplished by recognizing their culture through programs and events in the school setting. Programs should also work more to support not only

ESL teachers and school leaders but also the diverse communities' English language learners are coming from. Most importantly time must be set aside to build relationships with families of English language learners to convey expectations for social studies and civic engagement. Lastly, culturally relevant pedagogical training must also be facilitated with collaboration specifically between ESL teachers, mainstream teachers, and school leaders. There must be a significant increase in opportunities for mainstream teachers to gain knowledge about assessing English learners in elementary and middle grades studies content. They should be made to feel welcome in the environment through acknowledgement. In addition, advisement and direction should come from language experts and researchers. This will enable school districts to identify areas and assess needs in literacy to ensure they are appropriate and equitable for English language learners.

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