

Participation in a Professional Development Program on Culturally Responsive Practices in Wisconsin

State and school district leaders in Wisconsin are interested in improving education outcomes among Black students across the state. To achieve this goal, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction encourages schools to implement culturally responsive practices, which prior research suggests are related to improvements in outcomes among racial/ethnic minority students, and supports a professional development program on those practices called Building Culturally Responsive Systems. The department and other stakeholders in Wisconsin have asked for more comprehensive information about schools' participation in the program. Using data from the 2012/13–2018/19 school years, this study examined the percentage of schools statewide that participated in the program, differences in the characteristics of schools that participated in the program and of schools that did not participate, implementation of culturally responsive practices among schools that participated in the program and schools that did not participate, and the relationship between participation and school-level academic and behavior outcomes. The study found that 4 percent of schools across the state participated in the program (meaning that teachers and administrators from the school attended at least one of the program's five sessions). Schools that participated in the program had a larger average enrollment, were more likely to be eligible for Title I funds, and were more often located in cities and suburbs compared with schools that did not participate, but there was no meaningful difference between the two school groups in the percentage of Black students (the difference was less than 5 percentage points). About 17 percent of schools that participated in the program reported implementing culturally responsive practices in reading instruction compared with 28 percent of schools that did not participate. Program participation was not meaningfully related to a school's "closing gaps scores" for English language arts or math, attendance rate, suspension rate, or expulsion rate one year, two years, or three years later, after school characteristics and pre-program academic and behavior measures were accounted for. The small number of schools that reported implementing culturally responsive practices might be a factor in this result.

Why this study?

In 2015 Wisconsin had the largest gaps in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress between Black and White students in grades 4 and 8.¹ Due to this disparity, state and school district leaders in Wisconsin are interested in improving education outcomes among Black students. To achieve this goal, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction encourages schools to implement culturally responsive practices. Prior research suggests that these practices are related to improvements in engagement, motivation, writing skills, reading achievement, and math achievement as well as to reductions in behavior problems.²

1. National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). NAEP data explorer. Retrieved November 11, 2019, from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata>.

2. Dimick, A. S. (2012). Student empowerment in an environmental science classroom: Toward a framework for social justice science education. *Science Education*, 96(6), 990–1012. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ989868>. Milner, H. R. (2011). Culturally relevant pedagogy in a diverse urban classroom. *Urban Review*, 43(1), 66–89. Souryasack, R., & Lee, J. L. (2007). Drawing on students' experiences, cultures

To support the implementation of culturally responsive practices, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has funded, since the 2013/14 school year, the Building Culturally Responsive Systems professional development program. The department also encourages schools to embed culturally responsive practices in their multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS), a framework for schools to monitor, assess, and improve student academic achievement and behavior. When well implemented, MTSS may improve student outcomes.

State and school district leaders requested this study in order to obtain in-depth information about program participation, including the characteristics of schools that participate. The education leaders intend to use the findings to determine whether schools that might benefit most from the program are participating and to develop marketing strategies to encourage participation. The education leaders, who are also interested in the relationship between program participation and school-level academic and behavior outcomes, expect to use this information to improve the program and to guide follow-up studies.

What was studied and how?

This study addressed four research questions related to participation in the Building Culturally Responsive Systems professional development program for schools in Wisconsin between the 2013/14 and 2018/19 school years:

1. What percentage of schools participated in the program?
2. How are the characteristics of the schools that participated in the program different from the characteristics of the schools that did not participate?
3. What percentage of schools that participated in the program and what percentage of schools that did not participate reported implementing culturally responsive practices within their MTSS?
4. Is program participation related to school-level academic and behavior outcomes, after school characteristics and pre-program academic and behavior measures are accounted for?

This study team used data on school characteristics from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data³ as well as data on attendance at program sessions and data from surveys on the implementation of culturally responsive practices from the Wisconsin Response to Intervention Center. The study team calculated descriptive statistics to examine program participation, to compare characteristics of schools that participated in the program and schools that did not participate, and to explore implementation of culturally responsive practices. The study team used regression analysis to examine the relationship between program participation and school outcomes.

and languages to develop English language writing: Perspectives from these Lao heritage middle school students. *Heritage Language Journal*, 5(1), 79–97. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ831195>. Bui, Y. N., & Fagan, Y. M. (2013). The effects of an integrated reading comprehension strategy: A culturally responsive teaching approach for fifth-grade students' reading comprehension. *Preventing School Failure*, 57(2), 59–69. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1012311>. Hubert, T. L. (2013). Learners of mathematics: High school students' perspectives of culturally relevant mathematics pedagogy. *Journal of African American Studies*, 18(1), 324–336. Wortham, S., & Contreras, M. (2002). Struggling toward culturally relevant pedagogy in the Latino diaspora. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1(2), 133–144.

3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). Common Core of Data. Retrieved November 11, 2019, from <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>.

Findings

Overall, 4 percent of schools in Wisconsin participated in the professional development program on culturally responsive practices

Between the 2013/14 and 2018/19 school years 4 percent of schools in Wisconsin (96 of 2,290) participated in the program.

Schools that participated in the program had a larger average enrollment, were more likely to be eligible for Title I funds, and were more often located in cities and suburbs compared with schools that did not participate, but there was no meaningful difference between the two school groups in the percentage of Black students

Participating schools had a larger average enrollment (582) than nonparticipating schools (378; table 1). Participating schools also had a larger average number of teachers (41) than nonparticipating schools (25).

A higher percentage of participating schools than of nonparticipating schools were eligible for Title I funds (76 percent versus 71 percent; see table 1).

Participating schools were more often located in cities and suburbs than nonparticipating schools (42 percent versus 25 percent for cities and 30 percent versus 20 percent for suburbs; see table 1). Conversely, participating schools were less likely to be located in rural areas than nonparticipating schools (14 percent versus 36 percent).

Table 1. Characteristics of Wisconsin schools, by participation in the professional development program on culturally responsive practices, 2013/14–2018/19

Characteristic	Schools that participated in the program (n = 96)	Schools that did not participate in the program (n = 2,194)
Average school enrollment	582.3	378.4
Average number of teachers	41.4	25.3
Average teacher-to-student ratio	1 to 14	1 to 17
Eligible for Title I funds (percent)	76	71
Located in a “Big Five” district ^a (percent)	6	14
Average demographic makeup (percent of students)		
Black	8	9
Hispanic	12	10
Other race/ethnicity ^b	13	7
White	67	73
Eligible for the national school lunch program	46	43
Locale (percent of schools)		
City	42	25
Suburb	30	20
Town	15	19
Rural	14	36

a. The “Big Five” school districts are the five largest school districts in Wisconsin. These districts also serve the majority of Black students in the state.

b. Includes American Indian students, Asian students, Pacific Islander students, students who identify as two or more races/ethnicities, and students with unknown race/ethnicity.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the Wisconsin Response to Intervention Center, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data.

About 6 percent of participating schools were located in one of the “Big Five” school districts, which serve the majority of Black students in the state, compared with 14 percent of nonparticipating schools (see table 1).

About 17 percent of schools that participated in the program reported implementing culturally responsive practices in reading instruction

Among schools that responded to the Wisconsin Response to Intervention Center survey on practices in reading instruction, 17 percent of schools that participated in the program (10 of 58) reported implementing culturally responsive practices in reading instruction compared with 28 percent of schools that did not participate (229 of 808). Among schools that responded to the survey on practices in math instruction, there was no meaningful difference in the percentage of schools that implemented culturally responsive practices in math instruction between schools that participated in the program and schools that did not participate.

These results might not capture the true level of implementation of culturally responsive practices in schools because of the high level of missing data on implementation. Among all schools in Wisconsin, only 38 percent responded to the survey on practices in reading instruction, and only 26 percent responded to the survey on practices in math instruction. A nonresponse analysis indicated that whether a school was missing data on implementation of culturally responsive practices in reading instruction and math instruction was meaningfully related to school characteristics. Therefore, the findings on implementation of culturally responsive practices cannot be generalized to all schools in Wisconsin. This is an important limitation of the study.

Program participation was not meaningfully related to any school outcomes, after school characteristics and pre-program academic and behavior measures were accounted for

Program participation was not meaningfully related to a school’s closing gaps scores for English language arts or math, attendance rate, suspension rate, or expulsion rate one year, two years, or three years later, after school characteristics and pre-program academic and behavior measures were accounted for.

Implications

The lack of a meaningful relationship between program participation and school outcomes suggests that state and local education leaders in Wisconsin might want to explore how to improve the program to ensure that teachers are able to implement culturally responsive practices in schools. This could lead to improvements in school and student outcomes.

The findings yield several suggestions for follow-up studies to increase understanding of the program’s reach and outcomes. First, researchers might consider collecting data on the types of support teachers need to effectively implement culturally responsive practices after completing the program. Second, because the intervention is at the teacher level, researchers might consider tracking teacher-level changes in instruction before and after participation rather than school-level outcomes, which may take longer to change. Third, state and local education leaders could collect data through surveys or interviews to better understand why more schools are not participating in the program. Fourth, a follow-up study could examine whether the changes in teacher practice lead to changes in education outcomes for students, specifically Black students. Finally, if the program is determined to be effective, state and local education leaders in Wisconsin might contemplate how to boost participation in the program, especially among the schools and districts that need it most, such as the districts with the largest percentages of Black students.

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