Using Mixed Methods to Evaluate Cultural Responsiveness of Behavioral Interventions: A Case Example from Early Childhood

Dan Cohen, PhD and Carl Sumi, PhD
SRI International

Maureen Conroy, PhD
University of Florida

Kevin Sutherland. PhD
Virginia Commonwealth University

Population Diversity in Schools

Student populations have become more diverse over time(NCES, 2024).

From 2010 to 2021:

- White students decreased from 52% to 45%, Students of Color increased from 48% to 55%.
- Public schools with 75% or more Students of Color increased from 27% to 33%.

Population Diversity in Schools

Despite changing demographics, significant unmet need persists.

- Students of Color are less likely to receive mental healthcare and more likely to end services prematurely (Whitaker et al., 2018).

- There are few empirically supported culturally responsive school-based mental health interventions (Castro-Olivo, 2017).
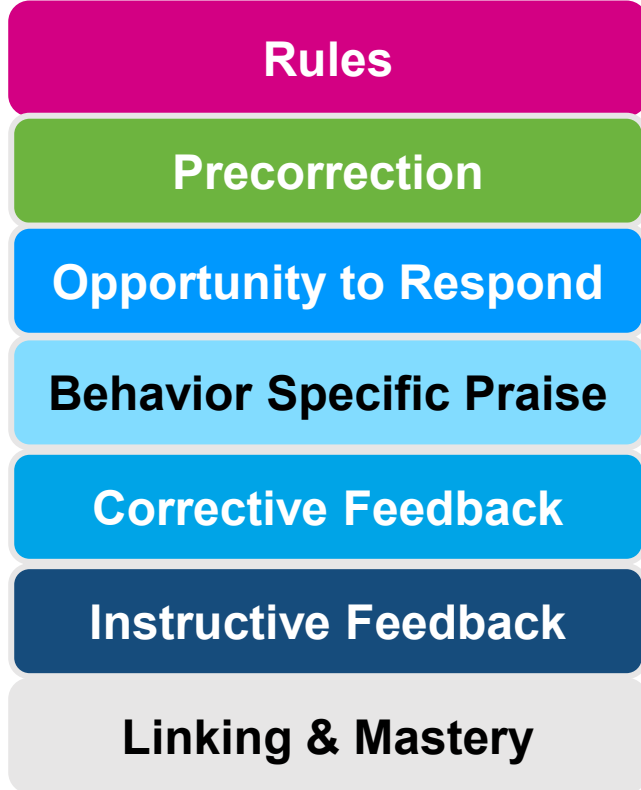
Current Approaches to Evaluating Cultural Responsiveness

- Examination of child behavior to see if gaps that were present at baseline have decreased.

- Validated measures of cultural responsiveness (Franco et al., 2024).

- Use of cultural responsive frameworks underlying comprehensive evaluation methods (Austin et al., 2023).

Current Study: Program Components

Rules

Precorrection

Opportunity to Respond

Behavior Specific Praise

Corrective Feedback

Instructive Feedback

Linking & Mastery

BEST in CLASS Practices

+

BEST in CLASS

BEST in CLASS Teacher Workshop and Manual

+

BEST in CLASS Collaborative Coaching Partnerships

Facilitated Instruction of New Skill

Shared Goals and Action Planning

BEST in CLASS Practices

Teacher Implementation With Support

Reflection and Feedback

Direct, Focused Observation

BEST in CLASS Practice-based Coaching

Current Study – Assessment of Cultural Responsiveness

- Distillation of key domains of culturally responsive practice from several widely disseminated frameworks (e.g. Bennett et al, 2018; Bradshaw et al., 2018; Leverson et al, 2021)

  - Survey items for intervention teachers.

  - Questions for semi-structured focus group protocols.
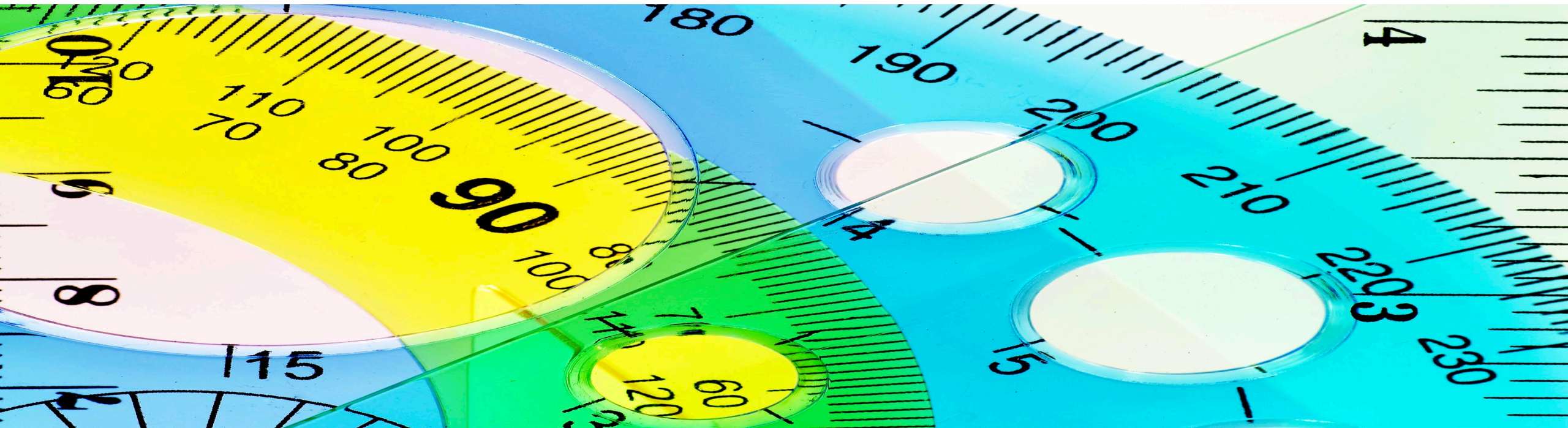
Current Study – Assessment of Cultural Responsiveness
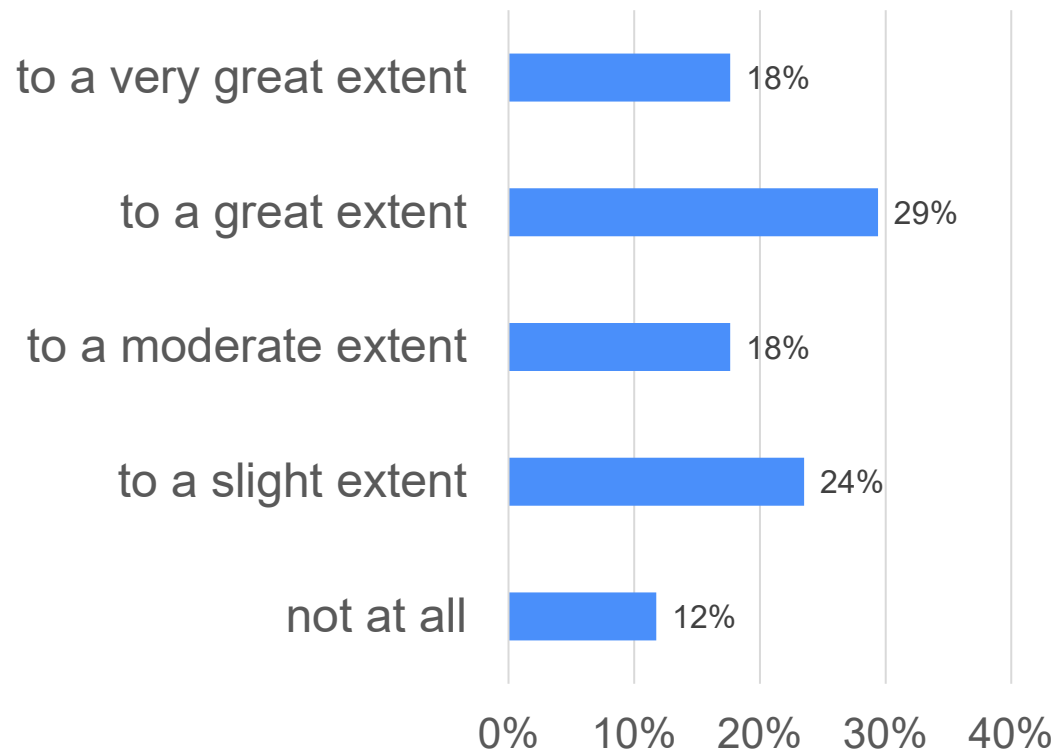
Distilled domains of practice include:

1) Family Engagement

2) Effective Communication to Prevent and Resolve Problems

3) Teacher-Student Relationship Building

4) Intervention/Curriculum Content Informed by Student Culture

5) Staff Self-Reflection

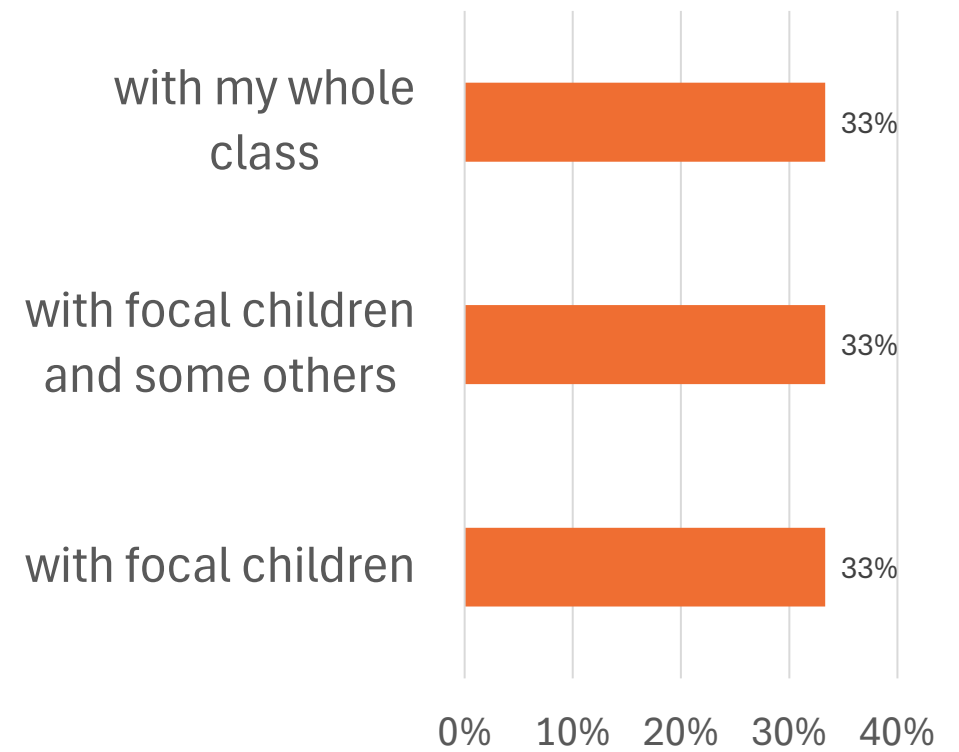6) Data-Based Decision-Making to Promote Equitable Access and Outcomes

Teacher Survey Items – Family Engagement

Coaching support for family engagement (n=17)

Category	Percentage
to a very great extent	18%
to a great extent	29%
to a moderate extent	18%
to a slight extent	24%
not at all	12%

Application of family engagement strategies (n=15)

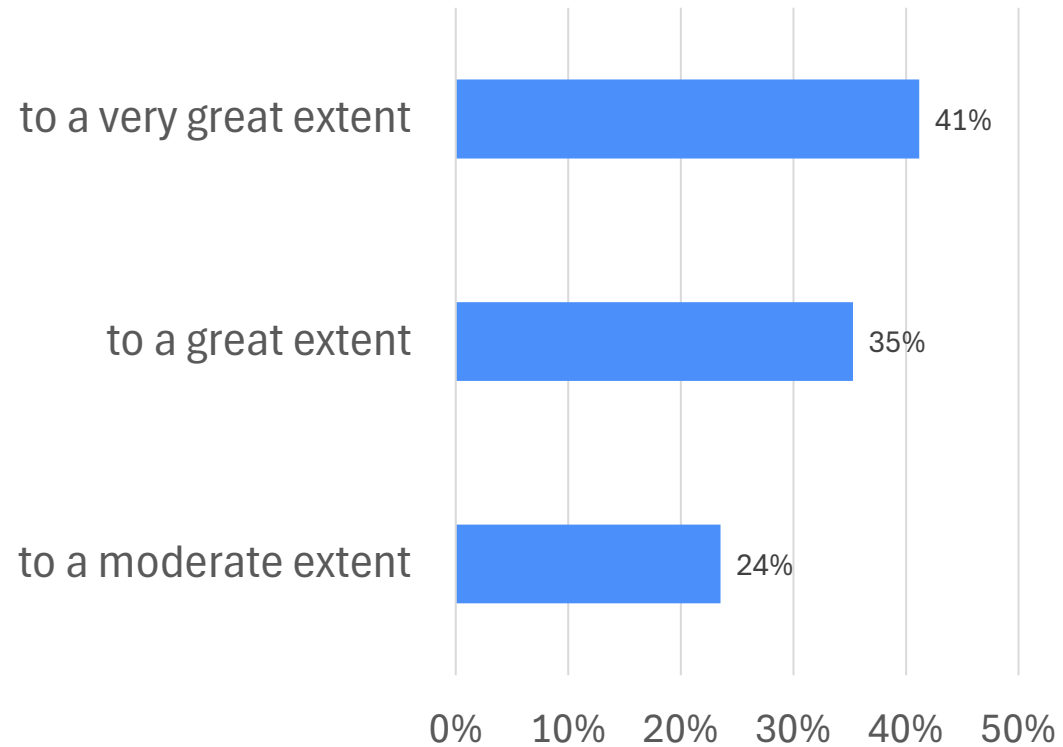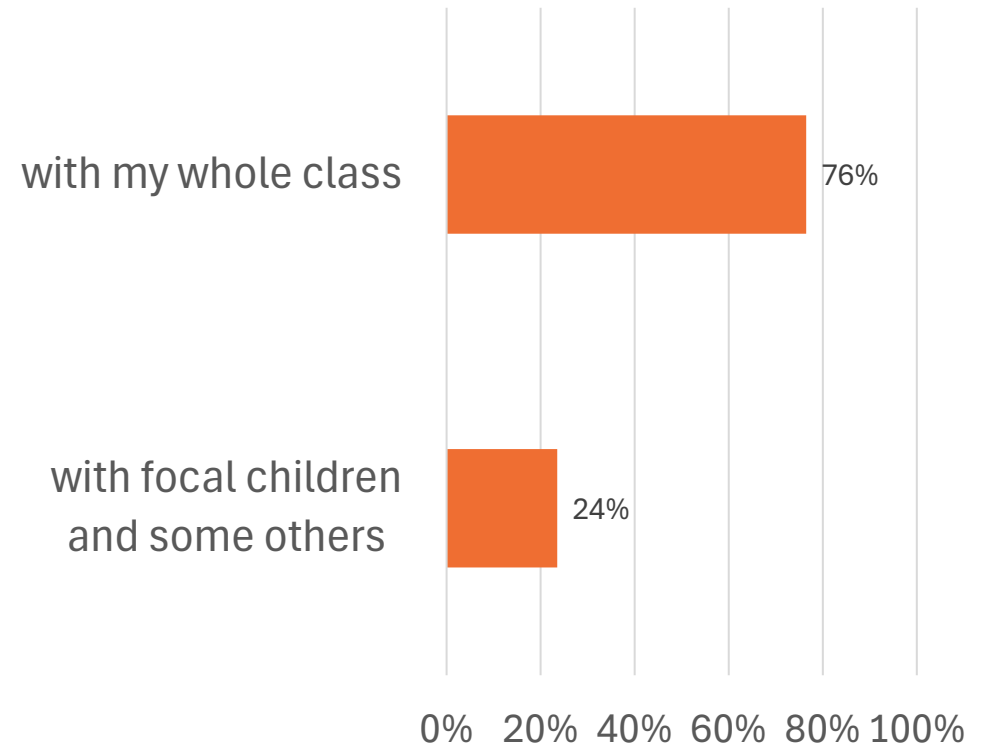| Category	Percentage
with my whole class	33%
with focal children and some others	33%
with focal children	33%

Teacher Survey Items - Relationships

Coaching support for building positive teacher-child relationships (n=17)

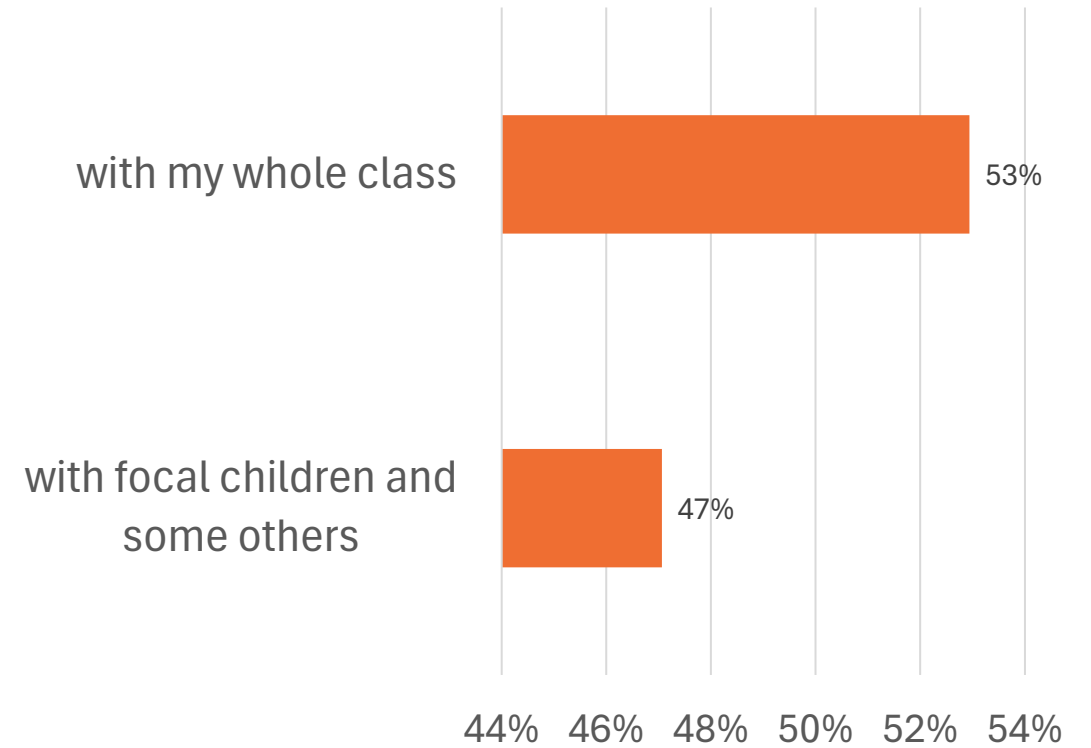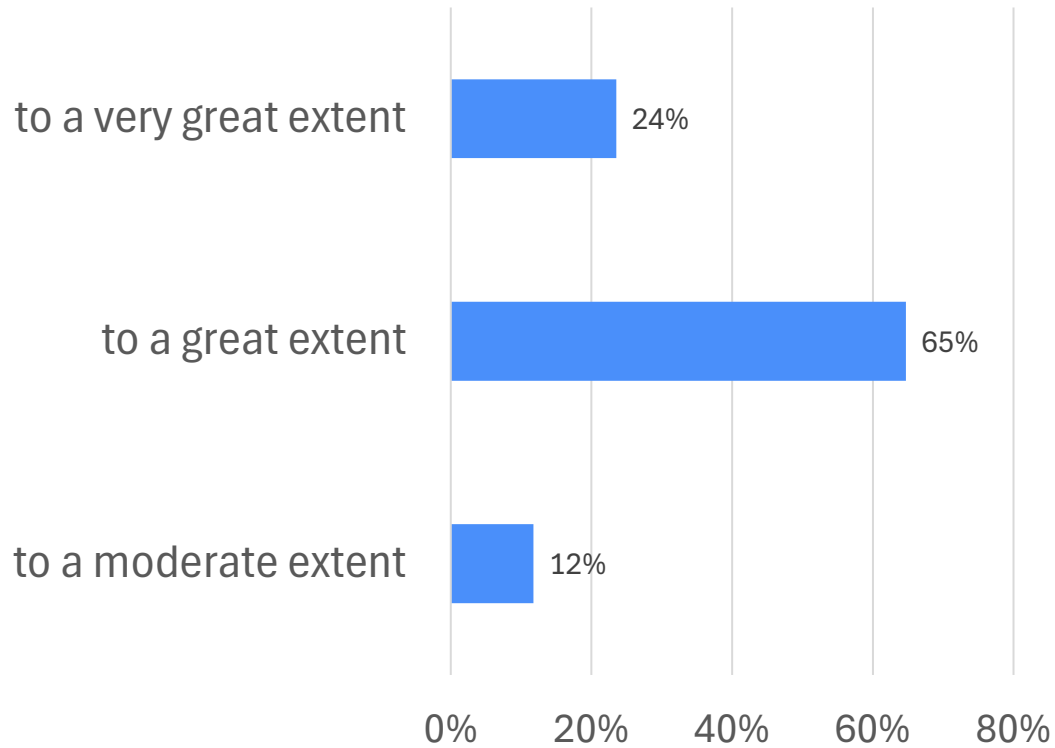Extent of teacher-child relationship building practices (n=17)

Teacher Survey Items - Communication

Coaching support for communication with children to prevent and solve problems (n=17)

Extent of communication practices to prevent and solve problems (n=17)

to a very great extent — 24%

to a great extent — 65%

to a moderate extent — 12%

with my whole class — 53%

with focal children and some others — 47%

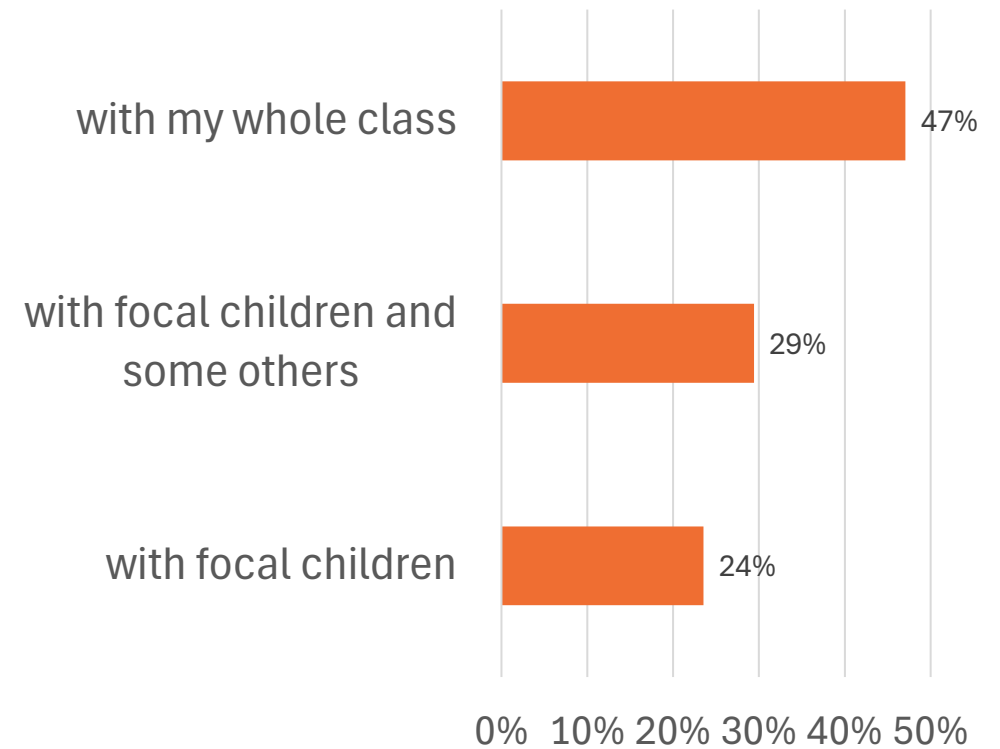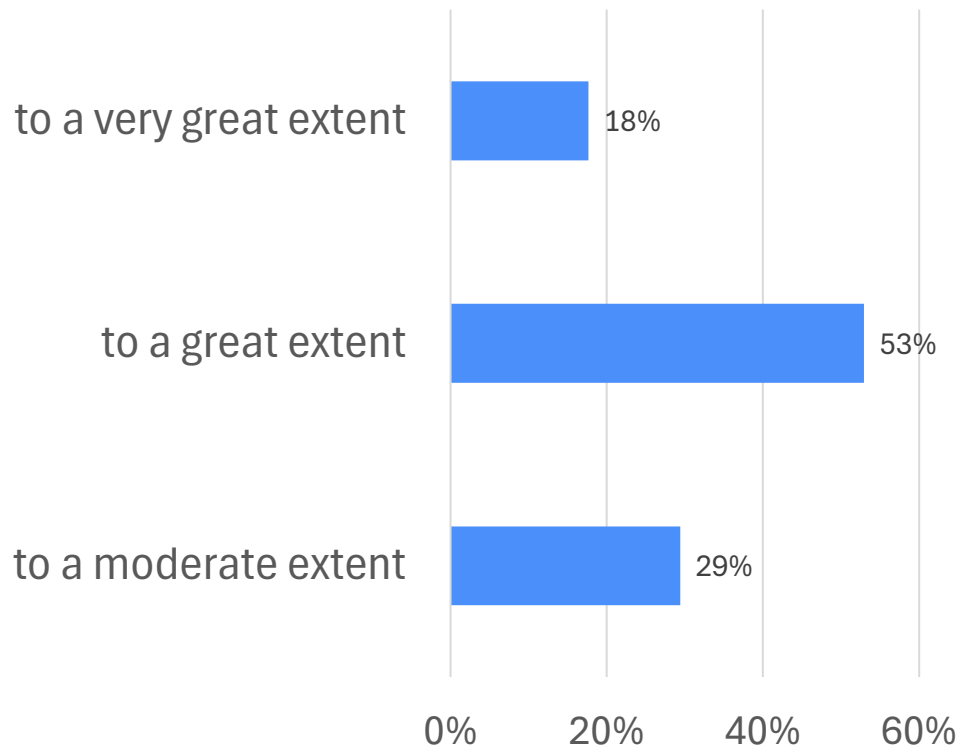# Teacher Survey Items – Informed By Culture

Coaching support for using behavior management strategies that are informed by student culture (n=17)

- to a very great extent — 18%
- to a great extent — 53%
- to a moderate extent — 29%

Extent of culture informed behavior management strategies (n=17)

- with my whole class — 47%
- with focal children and some others — 29%
- with focal children — 24%

Teacher Survey Items – Self Reflection

Coaching support for engaging in self-reflection (n=17)

to a very great extent	41%
to a great extent	35%
to a moderate extent	18%
to a slight extent	6%

Extent of application of self-reflection strategies (n=17)

with my whole class	47%
with focal children and some others	47%
with focal children	6%
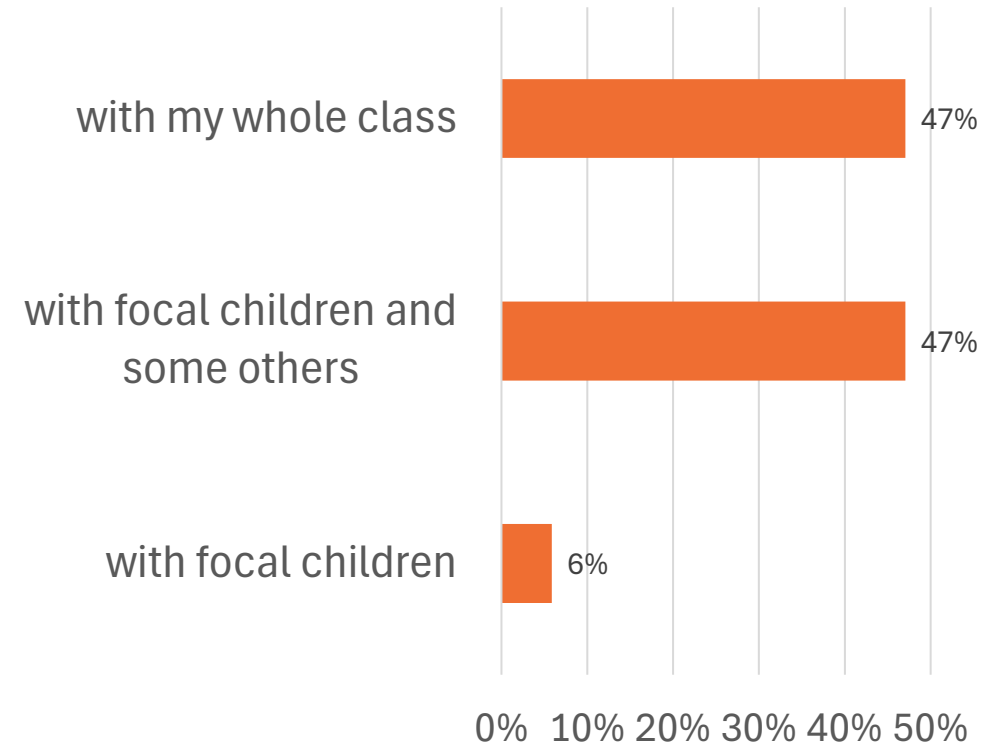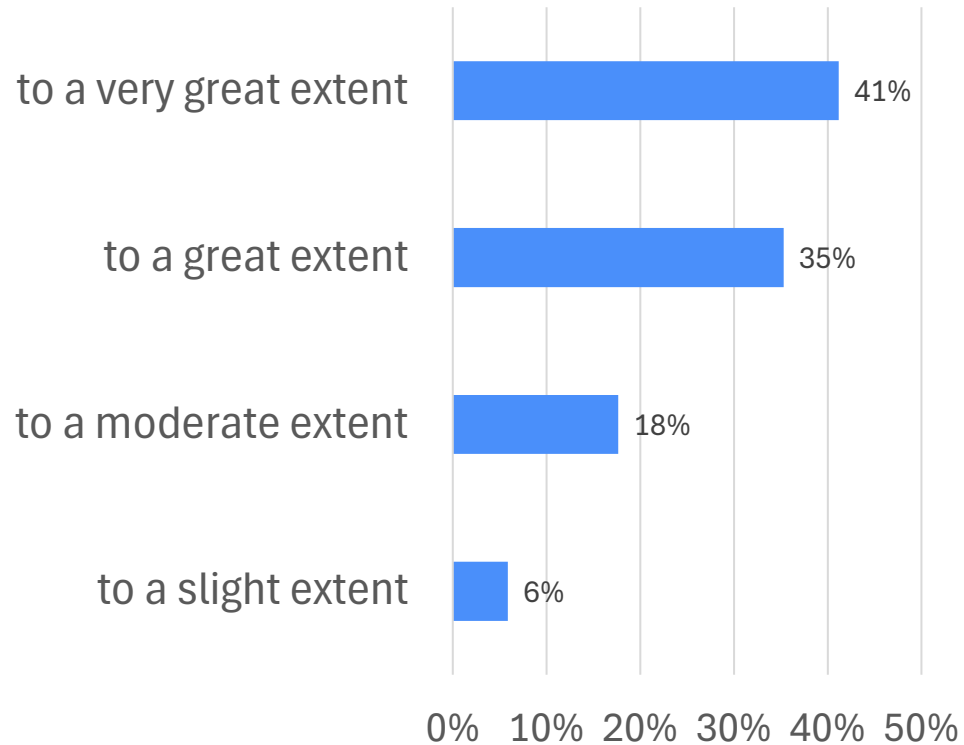
Teacher Survey Items – Decision-Making for Equity

Coaching support for data-based decision-making to promote equity (n=17)

Response	Percentage
to a very great extent	29%
to a great extent	47%
to a moderate extent	12%
to a slight extent	12%

Extent of data-based decision-making to promote equity (n=17)

Response	Percentage
with my whole class	35%
with focal children and some others	53%
with focal children	12%
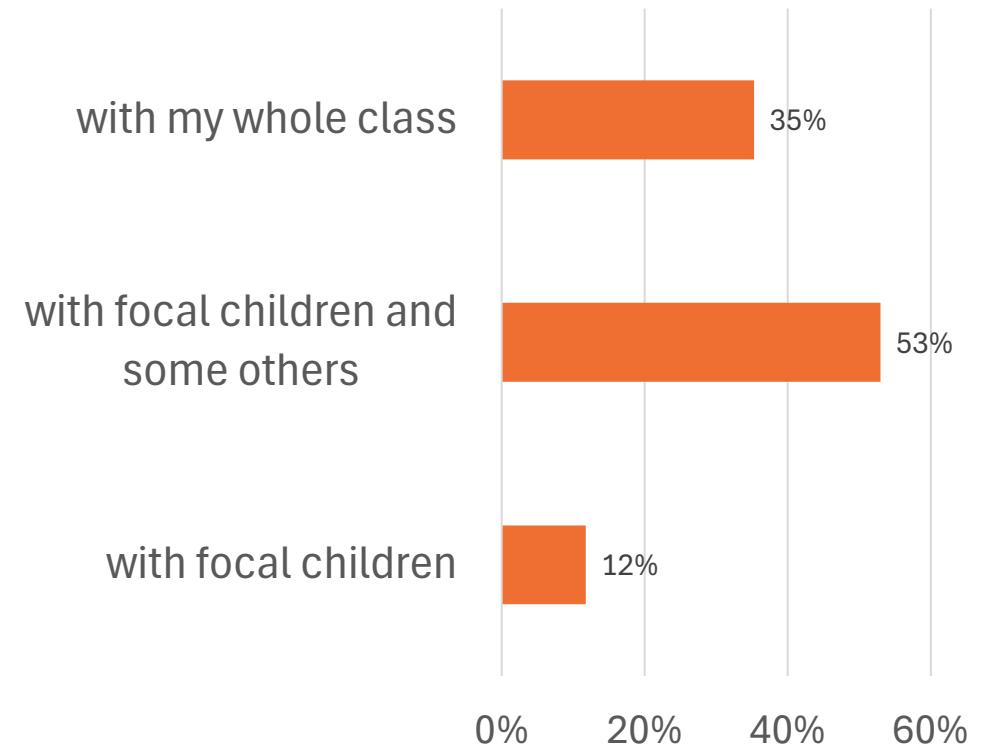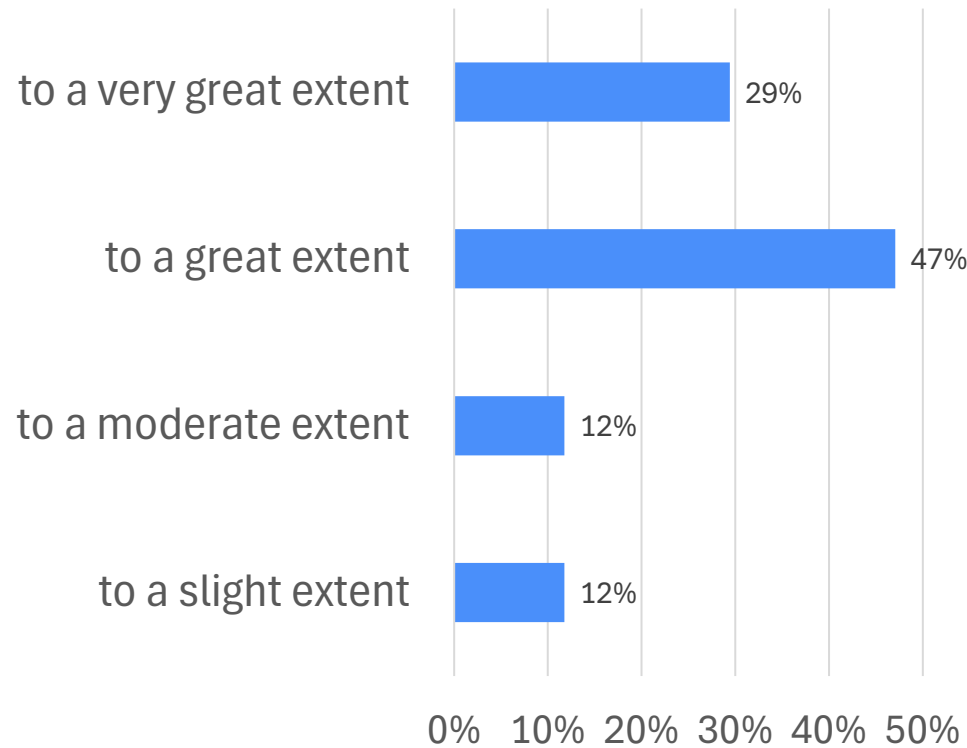
Coach Focus Group Questions

School-Based Coaches

To what extent did BEST in CLASS emphasize:

- **Family engagement**
- **Improving the quality of relationships between teachers and children**

Site Leads

To what extent did BEST in CLASS:

- **Promote family engagement**
- **Improve the quality of relationships between teachers and children**
- **Help teachers understand or interpret children's behavior**
- **Promote culturally responsive practices**

Family Engagement

- **Some success integrating family engagement elements, but also difficulty moving beyond core practices.**
- **Caregiver forms seen as optional, in-person meetings would have more impact.**

Site Lead Coaches

- Site leads instilled the importance of coaching on family engagement and embedded procedures into the coaching routine.
- It was a challenge for school staff to move beyond core practices and focus on family engagement.

School-Based Coaches

- The caregiver communication form was seen as optional and they felt that in person meetings would be more effective.
- When forms were sent home, there was no caregiver follow-up.

Behavior Specific Praise 1

What is behavior specific praise?

Behavior specific praise is a practice we are using to help the children in our class learn positive behaviors. Behavior specific praise is more specific than "Great job!" or "Way to go!" Behavior specific praise tells children exactly what they have done correctly and encourages children to use that behavior in the future. Behavior specific praise is given right after the child uses a positive, desired behavior.

Tips for Using Behavior Specific Praise

Behavior specific praise helps children learn positive behavior at school and can be used at home too. Here are some examples.

"Great job helping me carry the toys back inside. You are a terrific helper!"

"I love how you asked your sister if she wanted to play too!"

"Thank you for coming the first time I called you."

Our Week in Review

This week your child is doing a great job..._____

_____

_____

_____

We are working on..._____

_____

_____

Notes from Home: Please let me know about your child's week at home! Cut here and return this section to me in your child's backpack.
Caregiver's Name:_____Child's Name: _____

My child is doing a great job..._____

My child is working on..._____

Please contact me: YES or NO

Practice of the week
_____

Family Engagement – Site Lead

I think, we just we just talked to them. We just **really stressed about how important it was**. And I mean, most people, you know, in early education do understand that in a classroom or in an early care and education site **you only get the children for so long in a day, and then they go home**.

So I think, just in the training, you know, really going over the [caregiver communication] form, the **purpose of the form**. Why we want to send it out to the families. And then in the weekly meetings **following up**. And it's on the coaching plan. It's on the coaching checklist, making sure **they send home at least one family communication**.

Family Engagement – Site Lead

I think that they just had more **teacher support level questions** like, **how do I do this graph**? Or why didn't the cell work, or this observation was strange **should I redo it**?

It was almost like a little bit more **procedural support**, looking back and sort of definitely some anecdotal, like exciting stories, but a little less than about **how the teacher reached out to a caregiver**.

Family Engagement – School-based Coach

I think with it being **optional** [caregiver communication forms], I don't know what was in the air this year, but … the **staff struggled** this year to even get certain forms turned in. So this year was **a wonky year of parent communication** even to do their center visits…

I feel like if there was more like check ins periodically, maybe like in the beginning **to explain to them a little more about what we're going to be doing** and do… And then that way, I feel like we're really doing that **home to school connection** of what's been working in the classroom and going to be able to give them **more specific data and examples** that they could try to utilize at home if they're seeing behaviors…

because just kind of **sending a form home** or sending it through Class Dojo, or however they're communicating it to the families, we're **lucky if you even get anything back**.

Improving Teacher-Child Relationships

Increased positive interactions through the use of behavior specific praise and the review of video recordings helped to improve relationships

Site Lead Coaches

- Site leads emphasized the importance of the video clips in demonstrating the impact of tpositive interactions.

School-Based Coaches

- School-based coaches talked about how behavior specific praise and positive interactions strengthened trelationships.

Improving Teacher-Child Relationships – Site Lead Coach

I think the **video clips are really helpful** in them visually observing the **positive interactions** or course of interactions. Right? And so the coach shows them **video clips of interactions** that are really highly successful and then interactions where the teacher might have done something different, and going back and watching those.

The coaches talk to the teachers about that. And I think the **teachers are really responsive** to that.

Improving Teacher-Child Relationships – School-based Coach

I think, specifically the **behavior specific praise**, like catching them **doing good things** like setting them up for success changes the dynamic of a relationship because, I think sometimes, like our **expectations of 3 and 4 year olds** are bigger than our expectations of adults. And we all want to show up and do the right thing and do a good job.

But if you don't know what the expectations are, and our little guys, they're **still developing all that self-regulation** stuff. So like the voice that we're using with them now is going to be that **inner voice** that's going to talk to them for the rest of their lives.

Improving Teacher-Child Relationships – School-based Coach

And going back to what I said in the beginning about the **positive language** and **positive interactions**. It really helps teachers realize what they're saying matters and how they say it matters and how it affects that child, and **how you say something** to the child will **impact** the child's reaction. That's something that we work with on a daily basis, but doing it in a way to where it makes sense to teachers that was pretty awesome for me.

And it changes their the quality of the time that they're with them, because it's more **positive** and upbeat… it's done in a much more positive way and the **relationship between the child and teacher**, the dynamics change very nicely.

Understanding Children's Behavior

Site Lead Coaches

- BEST in CLASS supports teachers in understanding the link between practices and student behavior.

- Teachers gain a better understanding on the impact of context.

Understanding Children's Behavior

Something we did tweak a little bit in year two, because it wasn't happening as much as in year one is **linking practice use to child behavior**. So really helping the **coach** and the **teacher** **see the link between those two**.

So we sort of changed the graphing during year two to make that a little more **visually apparent**. And then they start thinking and talking differently about **problem behavior**. Because the focus becomes on their use of the practice and not the child.

Understanding Children's Behavior

My hope is that if **teachers** **go through the training** and get **good coaching** in the practices that they will more readily **look at themselves** when things are happening in the classroom that they don't want to happen. And as a first step to say, okay, I'm going to try to use **pre-correction**, or I'm going to try to use **rules**.

Or I'm going to try to do this versus, Oh, James has problems at home, and he **brings this into the classroom**. There's nothing I can really do about it.

Understanding Children's Behavior

I think there's definitely been some commentary about the **relationship building** with the **student**, like they just know more about their experiences or background or home life or trauma. And I think sometimes that helps like, not explain, but sort of just like **build empathy** or something. And I think that can sometimes be like a motivator to **change teaching behaviors** occasionally.

Culturally Responsive Practices

Site Lead Coaches

- BEST in CLASS and practice based coaching are culturally responsive because they focus on building an individualized plan for each student.

- Coaches can facilitate discussion about focal children's cultural context to inform teacher practice.

Culturally Responsive Practices

When **practice-based coaching** was designed, it was designed to be **culturally responsive** through building **partnerships**. But we didn't necessarily use those terms because we've been using practice based coaching, for 15 years, and I think those terms were not as much a part of our ongoing discussion as they are now.

So the coaches didn't talk about **culturally responsive practices** to me … but I think one of the things that's important to think about … is by virtue of creating **shared goals** and **action plans** with children who have very **diverse needs**, whether they're children with disabilities or children who are Spanish speaking or another language… by that process they are **creating individual plans** for children based on their needs, whatever they are.

Culturally Responsive Practices

It's very **individualized**… so in the **coaching meeting**, they're talking about the child, but the coach also asks, how have things gone with **family communication** this week? Have you heard from the **family**? And so that just opens the door, so that if there is something going on at home, if there is something going on in the **larger cultural environment**?

Discussion

Family engagement

- 36% of teachers: supported to slight extent or not at all
- School-based coaches: limited implementation, prefer in-person meetings rather than caregiver forms

Improving relationships between teachers and children

- 76% of teachers: supported to a great or very great extent and applied to the whole class
- School-based coaches and site leads: behavior specific praise and review of videos helped improve relationships

Communication to prevent and solve problems

- 89% of teachers: supported to a great or very great extent; 53%: applied to the whole class

Discussion

Behavior management strategies informed by culture

- 81% of teachers: supported to a great or very great extent; 47%: applied to the whole class

Self-reflection

- 76% of teachers: supported to a great or very great extent; 47%: applied to the whole class

Data-based decision-making to promote equity

- 76% of teachers: supported to a great or very great extent; 53%: applied to the focal children and some others

Discussion

Helping teachers understand or interpret children's behavior

- Site lead coaches: emphasized link between teacher practices and child behavior; teacher-child relationship development builds empathy

Promoting culturally responsive practices

- Site lead coaches: individualized nature of the program supports cultural responsiveness; coaches prompt teachers to consider the cultural context

Student Behavior Blog

Purpose: To help stakeholders learn about **evidence-based** approaches to support all students' **positive behavior**, **mental health**, and **well-being**.

Includes tips and findings from our research, evaluation, and TA work.

- Perspectives from our partners on the ground, too!

Send comments and inquiries about partnering or working with us to: studentbehaviorblog@sri.com

Visit us at:
https://studentbehaviorblog.org/

References

Austin, S. C., McIntosh, K., Izzard, S., & Daugherty, B. (2023). A Systematic Review of Single-Case Research Examining Culturally Responsive Behavior Interventions in Schools. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 33*, 639-666.

Bennett, S. V., Gunn, A. A., Gayle-Evans, G., Barrera, E. S., & Leung, C. B. (2018). Culturally responsive literacy practices in an early childhood community. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 46*, 241-248.

Bradshaw, C. P., Pas, E. T., Bottiani, J. H., Debnam, K. J., Reinke, W. M., Herman, K. C., & Rosenberg, M. S. (2018). Promoting cultural responsivity and student engagement through double check coaching of classroom teachers: An efficacy study. *School Psychology Review, 47*(2), 118-134.

Castro-Olivo, S. M. (2017). Introduction to special issue: Culturally responsive school-based mental health interventions. *Contemporary School Psychology, 21*, 177-180.

Franco, M. P., Bottiani, J. H., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2024). Assessing Teachers' Culturally Responsive Classroom Practice in PK–12 Schools: A Systematic Review of Teacher-, Student-, and Observer-Report Measures. *Review of Educational Research, 94*(5), 743-798.

Leverson, M., Smith, K., McIntosh, K., Rose, J., & Pinkelman, S. (2021). PBIS cultural responsiveness field guide: Resources for trainers and coaches. *OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

Whitaker, K., Nicodimos, S., Pullmann, M. D., Duong, M. T., Bruns, E. J., Wasse, J. K., & Lyon, A. R. (2018). Predictors of disparities in access and retention in school-based mental health services. *School Mental Health, 10*, 111-121.

Thank you!