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The purpose of the study was to investigate ways in which early childhood systems such as those that rate and license child care programs can incentivize, support, and reward cultural competence of the early care and education (ECE) workforce. The study employed a focus group design to consider the research problem from the vantage point of child care resource and referral (CCR&R) staff who routinely support ECE programs to meet system requirements and to engage in quality improvement work. Three focus groups were convened, with a total of N=28 participants, and the meetings were audio recorded and transcribed.

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Emergent themes were noted and grouped into three categories: capacity, content, and system. Focus group members advocated for incorporation of system requirements related to cultural competence as well as supports to ensure that ECE providers could succeed in meeting new requirements. A conceptual model was developed to represent the relation between themes and categories, and recommendations and future directions are discussed.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN NORTH CAROLINA'S
EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION
SYSTEM

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Brain research in the last decade has made clear the important link between caregiver interactions and young children's outcomes (Shonkoff & Philips 2000). Stable relationships with caring adults, and positive, responsive interactions within the context of those relationships foster early brain development as well as long term social, cognitive, and health outcomes (Fox, Levitt, & Nelson III 2010; Joseph & Strain, 2004). The science of early childhood has progressed in its understanding of development's key ingredients over a period of time that has also seen a shift in the face of early childhood in the United States. Non-Hispanic White children in the United States now constitute approximately 50% of the total child population in the country (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). With more parents working, a growing number of this diverse population of young children (birth through age six) requires non-parental care, and in North Carolina that population represents 65% of all young children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014b). How do early childhood systems respond to both the science that suggests a need for high quality responsive interactions and the demographics that suggest a multitude of racial and ethnic contexts in which caregiving relationships must be built? In short, how do early childhood systems incorporate both developmentally appropriate practices and

culturally responsive practices or cultural competence? In this study, the definitions of culture and cultural competence were borrowed from Cross et al., (as cited by the National Center for Cultural Competence, 2016):

Culture: the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group.
Cultural competence: a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Given the changing composition of children and families in early childhood programs, the purpose of this study was to explore how North Carolina can address cultural competence in its early care and education (ECE) workforce.

Federal Focus

Federal agencies are calling for culturally responsive practices through new program requirements for grantees across a number of funding streams. States that participate in the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDF) have been directed to support ECE teachers' culturally competent practices (Administration for Children and Families, 2015) as well as to increase family involvement in children's learning and development (Administration for Children and Families, 2014). The latest Head Start program performance standards (45 C.F.R. § 1304.21, 2015) require grantees to be accepting, respectful, and supportive of children's cultural backgrounds and to learn about and respond to families' cultural contexts. Finally, the federal Departments of Education and

Health and Human Services underscored the importance of cultural competence in a notice of their joint competitive grant program, Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, 2011). The notice set forth grant requirements for participating states, including culturally responsive early learning standards for young children's development, culturally responsive family engagement practices, and a workforce trained to incorporate culturally responsive practices in connecting with families and supporting children's learning and development.

North Carolina Focus

North Carolina's approach to cultural competence in its ECE system is reflected in its consideration of changes in three areas: licensing requirements for ECE programs; quality measurement in ECE programs; and training requirements for the ECE workforce. The three areas will be described in order, beginning with licensing requirements including the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). In the fall of 2009, North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) convened its QRIS advisory committee. This group of diverse stakeholders met over a period of three years to consider the next generation of requirements for the state's ECE system including licensed center and home-based child care, Head Start, and Pre-K (North Carolina Department of Health & Human Services, 2012). Unlike many other states, North Carolina's QRIS is embedded in the state's licensing requirements, so the committee had to give consideration for basic requirements

as well as higher-level quality indicators. The committee made a number of recommendations about the future of the state's ECE system, including situating cultural competence as one of the basic requirements for all ECE programs. This core requirement included training for the workforce and administrative planning to address cultural competence at the program level.

As the work of North Carolina's QRIS advisory committee was drawing to a close, the federal Department of Education, in partnership with the federal Department of Health and Human Services, issued a notice of funding availability for round one of their Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (ELC) grants (Department of Education, 2011). North Carolina's application for the grant (North Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2011) reflected an expansion of the QRIS advisory committee's focus on cultural competence. Related ELC projects included incorporation of the advisory committee's core cultural competence requirements in a study of the proposed QRIS model; incorporation of cultural competence in a new ECE program quality measure; and a multi-year, multi-mode cultural competence project that included the development of a five-hour cultural competence course to be delivered by the child care resource and referral (CCR&R) system.

The ELC-funded program quality measure was envisioned as a tool suitable for use in QRIS, with North Carolina leading a consortium of states including Delaware and Kentucky in the development process (North Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2011). The measure is designed to holistically

evaluate program quality across three assessment types: observations in classrooms; interviews with providers, and review of program policies and documents (Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Program Quality Measure Development Project Overview, 2015). The assessments are grounded in key practices that reflect a focus on cultural competence throughout the program. This focus includes the program's commitment to the positive engagement of all children and families; support for learning that is embedded in a culturally responsive environment; and provision for the deep engagement of families in their children's learning and development.

The ELC cultural competence project was designed to engage ECE teachers, administrators, family child care home providers, and technical assistance or professional development providers (North Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2011). The project convened four two-day institutes in which cultural competence content was delivered and participants collaborated on ideas to improve classroom or program practices (Day-Hairston, Pemberton, & Kennedy, 2015). In the intervening months between the institutes, ECE providers were supported to test their ideas for practice improvements, and results were shared at subsequent gatherings. Finally, the project developed, piloted, refined, and released a five-hour Introduction to Cultural Competence training, which technical assistance providers who had participated in the project were certified to deliver. Another ECE project related to the state's child care resource and referral (CCR&R) system was responsible for statewide delivery of

the Introduction to Cultural Competence training to ECE teachers, administrators, and family child care home operators (North Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2011).

Although the state still lacks a comprehensive and systemic strategy to promote cultural competence among ECE providers and programs, these combined activities have generated interest and momentum on the topic. The proposed study seeks to tap into this energy as it engages CCR&R system staff in dialog about their views of cultural competence in the state's ECE system. Voices from the field will therefore inform this research on the opportunities and challenges related to incorporating cultural competence in training and program requirements in North Carolina's ECE system.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Implementation Science

Whereas Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological model tells us why we should be concerned with incorporating children's cultural backgrounds (context) in their everyday interactions (proximal processes), implementation science (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005) tells us how this goal might be accomplished in a systematic and sustainable way. Implementation science focuses on the processes, systems, and steps necessary to bring research to practice in human services endeavors (Fixsen, et al, 2005). Fixsen and colleagues' original (2005) framework as well as more recent work (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009; & Franks & Schroeder, 2013) provide a means for considering how cultural competence might be embedded in a larger ECE system and serves as a framework to guide this research study.

Components of implementation science. Fixsen and colleagues' (2005) synthesis of implementation-related literature yielded a common set of components necessary for successful and sustained implementation of evidence based practices (EBP). These core implementation components included: staff hiring, training, and ongoing support; staff and program evaluation; administrative

support; and systems-level interventions. The implementation drivers were described as highly integrated and balanced, in that a lack in one area could be overcome by a strength in another area with no detriment to the implementation process. Although implicitly a part of the earlier (2005) model, later work (Fixsen et al., 2009) elevated the construct of data-based decision making to the level of a core implementation component. Subsequent refinement (Blase, Van Dyke, Fixsen, & Bailey, 2012) organized the core components into three groups of drivers: competency drivers; leadership drivers; and organization drivers.

Competency drivers include those activities that support the capacity of staff to implement the selected EBP (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015). Ideally, staff hiring decisions would be at least partially informed by whether a candidate would be able to implement the chosen practice. The staff selection process might involve verifying pre-service training on the practice, or perhaps evaluating a candidate's response to coaching through in-person performance-based interviews. Existing staff in a program committed to successful implementation would likely receive training on the evidence-based practice as well as coaching or other support to incorporate the new ideas or strategies into their own practice. Implementation of the new practice would be routinely assessed (staff evaluation), and additional support would be provided as needed.

Leadership drivers are represented as a continuum of approaches necessary to guide and oversee implementation of the selected EBP (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015). A very straightforward implementation plan, where the

steps to implement and the expected outcomes were well defined and understood might require more practical or procedural guidance. More creative or responsive leadership would be needed to support more complex implementation, and the complexity might reside in the EBP itself, in the problem it seeks to address, in the population or systems involved, or in any combination of these elements.

Organization drivers consist of those program-level and system-level elements necessary to support EBP implementation (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015). At the program level, this includes alignment of program philosophies, goals, and policies with the EBP. Also included at the program level is data collection and analysis to assess implementation and impact of EBP and make adjustments to improve implementation as needed. Organization drivers at the system level include alignment of system requirements and supports with installation or implementation needs of programs and service needs of the EBP's target population. System level organization drivers can involve administrators at the program level accessing system-level supports or lobbying for changes in system requirements or funding, as well as system-level personnel working with or on behalf of program personnel to improve alignment and thus support implementation.

Large-scale or system-wide implementation of an EBP requires work at the practitioner level, the program level, and the systems level (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015). There must be buy-in or readiness for implementation (Fixsen, et

al, 2005), which includes consensus about the goals and expected outcomes of the EBP to be implemented, as well as the implementation plan itself (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015). There must be evaluation of and support for practice change at each level, from the teacher learning new ways of interacting with children and families, to the administrator learning new ways of setting the stage for, evaluating, and supporting such interactions, to the system(s) seeking to incentivize, support, evaluate, and reward such practices (Fixsen et al., 2009).

Viewing North Carolina’s cultural competence work through an implementation science lens. North Carolina’s Early Learning Challenge projects related to cultural competence (North Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2011) can be similarly classified through the lens of implementation science. The testing of cultural competence indicators in the study of the proposed QRIS model can be seen as both a test of an organization driver (system requirements) and a test of population readiness for such requirements. The inclusion of cultural competence elements in the pilot of a new ECE program quality measure can also be classified as a test of an organization driver in that the measure provides evaluation data to support decision making related to policies, practices, and continuous quality improvement. The cultural competence project, however, can be viewed as a test of all three implementation drivers. Initial training and coaching were designed to build buy-in and readiness in teaching staff, program administrators, and technical assistance personnel, which incorporated competency, leadership, and

organization drivers. Further training and coaching supported the testing and evaluation of change in programs and classrooms, again involving all three implementation drivers. Perhaps the most enduring output of the project, however, is a five-hour in-depth introduction to cultural competence training developed in collaboration with participants of the larger training and coaching project. Designed as an entry point through which teachers and administrators are introduced to the concepts and begin to think about how they contribute to or hinder culturally competent practices within their own classrooms and programs, this training is firmly in the class of competency drivers. The training can be seen as a part of setting the stage for further cultural competence work. Taken together, these projects reflect investments in the very drivers that should support high quality implementation of the chosen practice (Franks & Schroeder, 2013).

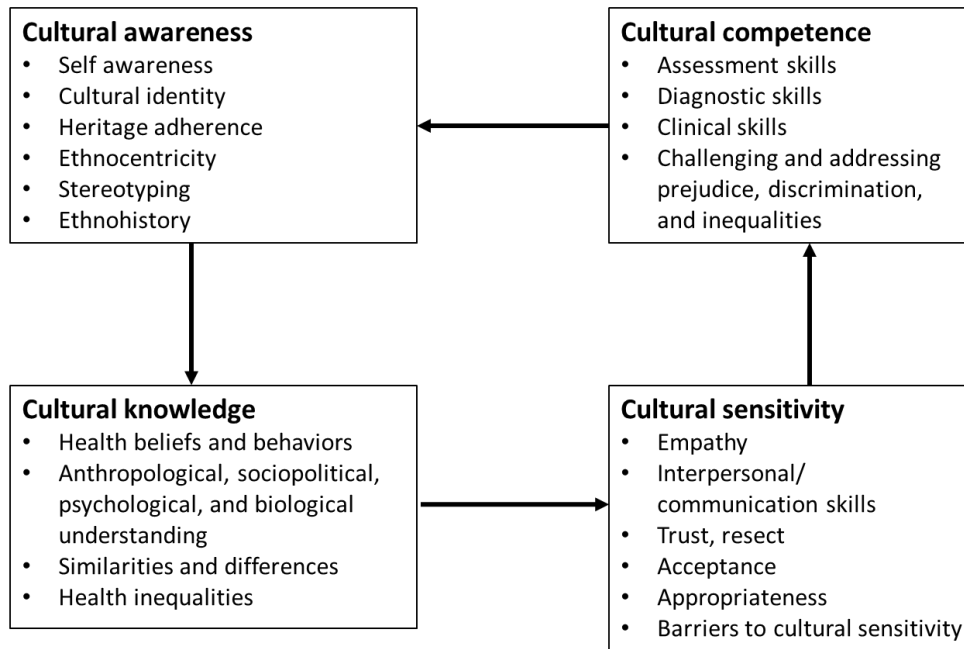
Cultural Competence in Early Care and Education

Turning from the broad elements needed to implement any EBP to the specifics of cultural competence, Papadopoulos (2006) and colleagues created a model (see Figure 1) that organizes and portrays the interrelated stages of cultural competence development. Although the model was initially developed for use in the nursing field, the general framework has broader applications to other social service and care fields, and offers an explanation of the process that individuals often follow along the way to becoming more culturally competent. In addition to describing the stages that individuals often progress through, it offers

insights into the types of experiences and supports that an ECE system with the goal of promoting cultural competence would need to provide in order to help individuals and programs progress.

The first stage in the ever-evolving process of cultural competence development has to do with awareness. To begin the journey, one must cultivate awareness of one's own culture, identity, beliefs, and biases and consider these in relation to other cultures. The next step is to learn about other groups and individuals and how their culture and experiences differ. The goal at this level is to begin to identify and understand differences and how culture shapes and is shaped by experience. Practitioners at the next or cultural sensitivity stage of their cultural competence journeys would meet differences with empathy and respect how those differences might impact or be impacted by service delivery. At the subsequent cultural competence stage of the model, practitioners would assimilate the knowledge and experience gained along the pathway in order to confront and address issues of prejudice, racism, and inequity. Each of these stages is described in more detail below.

Figure 1. Papadopoulos, Tilki, & Taylor Model of Cultural Competence Development



Adapted from "The Papadopoulos, Tilki and Taylor model of developing cultural competence" by I. Papadopoulos. In Papadopoulos, I. (Ed.), *Trans-cultural health and social care: Development of culturally competent practitioners*, 2006. Copyright 2006 by Elsevier.

Cultural awareness. The literature around preparation of early childhood teachers is fairly consistent in its support for the first step in the Papadopoulos, Tilki, Taylor (2006) model (PTT model) for developing cultural competence. Teachers need guided, supported opportunities to investigate their own cultural heritage, experiences, and beliefs about issues of privilege and social justice (Boutte, 2008; Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser, 2009; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008; Maude et al., 2009). As Summer (2014) points out, many early childhood teachers are unaware of their own biases toward certain groups. Even experienced teachers are unlikely to realize how their unconscious

attitudes shape their expectations of and interactions with children of diverse backgrounds (Boutte, 2008; Graue, Whyte, & Delaney, 2014; Summer, 2014). Pre-service teacher preparation programs (Groulx & Sylva, 2010; Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008), as well as in-service professional development for teachers (Gay, 2002) have been shown effective at providing this supported, critical self-reflection that brings to light issues of both consciously and unconsciously held beliefs (including stereotypes) about self and others.

Cultural knowledge. As teachers gain greater awareness of their own culture and culturally-situated beliefs and expectations, they begin to feel more comfortable in learning about the cultures and contexts of the families they serve (Graue, Whyte, & Delaney, 2014; Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2005, 2008). Teachers can then begin to connect with families and learn about families' experiences with education and expectations for their children's education (Summer, 2014). As they work through this cultural knowledge stage in the PTT model, teachers develop a better understanding of how they pass on information about racial differences both explicitly and obliquely (Boutte, 2008; Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Summer, 2014). Teachers who are gaining cultural knowledge begin to appreciate the ways in which they and their students and families are similar and the ways in which they are different, including disparities in access to high quality educational experiences (Boutte, 2008; Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser, 2009; Gay, 2002; Maude et al., 2009).

Cultural sensitivity. The process of developing and acquiring cultural knowledge facilitates the transition to the next step in the PPT model: Cultural sensitivity. Culturally sensitive teachers use their knowledge and skills to learn how to better communicate with families and thereby learn about families' and children's needs, interests, skills, challenges, and expectations (Barbour, Barbour, & Scully, 2005; Boutte, 2008; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through ongoing critical self-reflection, teachers are able to identify, accept, and respond appropriately to differences (Boutte, 2008; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Graue, Whyte, & Delaney, 2014). Teachers at this stage begin to see families as partners in their children's education and may begin to base curricular and classroom activities on what they learn from families (Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser, 2009; Maude et al., 2009). In other words, culturally sensitive teachers are beginning to adapt their teaching strategies and content to reflect the cultural location of the children in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Cultural competence. Culturally competent teachers demonstrate the value of children's cultures and contexts every day by weaving into their classrooms and pedagogical practices the knowledge they have gained from the families they serve (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These teachers have high expectations for culturally and ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2002); they understand behavior, communication, and learning from a cultural perspective (Summer, 2014); and they respond from a strengths-based perspective (Graue, Whyte, & Delaney, 2014). Culturally competent teachers interrogate their

curricula for embedded racism and adjust their plans to eliminate it (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Castillo, 2011). Teachers at this level also work to build children's knowledge of differences, privilege, and social justice and their skills to actively question and work against discrimination and bias (Boutte, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Miller, 2003).

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The literature on this topic aligns with the PTT model's steps along the pathway to cultural competence as well as with the continuous and ever-evolving nature of the journey (Boutte, 2008; Boutte Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Castillo, 2011; Gay, 2002; Graue, Whyte, & Delaney, 2014). The research also points to the need for systemic and ongoing support for teachers' critical self-reflection at every step along the pathway (Groulx & Sylva, 2010; Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008; Miller, 2003; West-Olatunji, Behar-Horenstein, & Rant, 2008), which echoes the organization and competency drivers of the most recent implementation framework (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015). Furthermore, implementation science calls for the engagement of practitioners or purveyors in readying the system to support, promote, or scaffold a new practice (Fixsen et al., 2009). This study sought to engage with a particular group of purveyors from CCR&R in order to explore their views on cultural competence in the state's ECE system.

Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) is one of North Carolina's primary strategies to support ECE programs to succeed in the state's QRIS (NC Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). A three-agency management hub oversees the statewide CCR&R network which, among other things,

employs trainers and technical assistance (T&TA) staff who help ECE providers meet requirements and improve practice. Specific to the topic of the present study, the three CCR&R management hub agencies delivered the introduction to cultural competence training in their own regions and oversaw its delivery across the state. The present study sought to tap into the experiences and expertise of both system-level CCR&R staff (state-wide lens) as well as T&TA staff (local lens, program-level experience) through discussions on the topic of embedding cultural competence in NC's ECE system. In order to ground the discussion and ensure common understanding, we covered participant experiences on the topic. Then we explored participant suggestions for promoting cultural competence generally, and then within the QRIS and the larger ECE system. Following are the specific research questions that guided the study:

Question 1: What are CCR&R staff members' experiences with training on the topic of cultural competence?

Question 2: What suggestions do CCR&R staff have for strategies to support teachers' cultural competence?

Question 3: How do CCR&R staff think cultural competence can or should be incorporated into NC's QRIS?

- a. How could cultural competence be incentivized and rewarded in the QRIS?
- b. What supports would be needed at the classroom, program, and CCR&R level?

Question 4: How do CCR&R staff think that cultural competence might be incorporated in North Carolina's larger ECE system?

- a. What opportunities can be leveraged to meet this goal?
- b. What challenges or barriers might impede progress toward this goal?

My expectation was that CCR&R staff would have a range of experiences both with cultural competence training and with local, regional, and system-level issues related to supporting ECE programs to succeed in the state's QRIS. The ideas and suggestions offered were therefore likely to range from very specific notions about teacher training to more program-level issues of administrative support to system-level issues such as measurement, regulation, and funding. The focus group framework allowed for a diversity of voices, experiences, and viewpoints to inform the study.

I should disclose my own bias in favor of a state-level systems approach to improving ECE in NC. As a former employee of the state agency that implements QRIS (NC Division of Child Development and Early Education or DCDEE), I served as project officer for both statewide CCR&R services and for DCDEE's ELC projects (including those described above). As such I have witnessed the positive impact that coordinated services can have on programs as well as the challenges that prevent or impede statewide functioning of such programs. These experiences and my own personal biases that stem from these experiences could potentially influence the data collection process and my analyses. In order to address these biases, I encouraged CCR&R EDs to recruit

staff with both local and system-level perspectives to ensure that a range of perspectives were included in the study. Additionally, during each focus group meeting I paid attention to which participants seemed more inclined to speak and which were less likely to offer their ideas or suggestions. For the latter group I encouraged or directly solicited their feedback in order to support participation from all members. Finally, I did not know and had not previously worked with the majority of the focus group participants, which meant that most participants were not familiar with my thoughts about the ECE system. Further, this majority had no prior relationship with me as their contract officer and therefore would not feel a need to offer ideas that they felt were in line with my perspective. In the first focus group I knew three out of nine participants; in the second I knew three out of 10 participants; and in the third I knew two of out of nine participants.

CHAPTER IV

METHOD

The current study employed a focus group format to consider the research questions from the vantage point of those CCR&R staff who support ECE quality improvement either through system-level work or through direct training and technical assistance to ECE providers. Prior to data collection, an IRB application was submitted to the UNCG Institutional Review Board for human subjects review. The study was deemed exempt from review. The methodology for the study is described below.

Participants

Each of the three focus groups in the study was comprised of both system-level staff and direct T&TA staff employed by the relevant CCR&R agency, as well as the agency head or executive director. Participants (n=28) were drawn from three CCR&R management agencies. The Executive Director or her designee at each CCR&R management agency was asked to invite participants with a diversity of experience such that each focus group would include staff that worked directly with ECE providers through training and/or technical assistance; staff that worked at a more regional or system level; and, across each group, staff that had a mix of experiences with cultural competence training. All participants were female. Demographic surveys were sent to

participants following the focus group interviews, and 21 responded (75% response rate). The majority of those completing the demographic surveys (86%, n=18) had more than ten years of experience in the ECE field. The total group was approximately evenly split in terms of age with 52% (n=11) between ages 35 and 48, and 48% (n=10) age 50 and above. The majority of survey respondents (86%, n=18) were direct T/TA providers in ECE programs, as compared with 14% (n=3) who focused on regional- or system-level issues. A smaller majority (57%, n=12) had a Bachelor's degree or higher in ECE, and 38% (n=8) had a Bachelor's degree or higher in another field. One participant had completed an Associate's degree in ECE. In terms of race and ethnicity, 76% (n=16) of respondents identified as White/ European; 14% (n=3) identified as Black/ African; 10% (n=2) identified as multiracial; 95% (n=20) identified as not Hispanic/ Latino; and 5% (n=1) identified as Hispanic/ Latino. Three participants reported having between five and eight years of experience in the ECE field. The majority of respondents (86%, n=18) reported having more than 12 years of experience in ECE, and half of those (n=9) reported 20 or more years of experience in the field. It is important to note that all participants were involved in some aspect of ECE quality improvement work, whether at the classroom, local, regional, or state level. Participants brought with them this perspective and a commitment to improving the QRIS. Additionally, they displayed a related commitment to embedding cultural competence in the ECE system in North Carolina. In other words, these focus group participants routinely considered as

part of their jobs the question of how to improve ECE quality. Those who had participated in training on the topic viewed culturally competent practices as a critical component to improving ECE quality.

Procedure

Upon consent from each of the three executive directors (ED), I scheduled a one-and-a-half-hour focus group session at each agency's main office. I sent follow-up emails to each ED, confirming the participant roster and answering additional questions. The focus group questions were sent to the CCR&R ED or her designated staff in advance of the meeting, and distributed to participants so that they had time to review and give thought to the questions ahead of time.

On the day of the focus group, participants gathered in a room at the agency's main office. I began each focus group with a brief overview of the study followed by participant introductions. I then asked each participant in turn to describe her own experiences with cultural competence training (i.e., the first question on the protocol). This question provided opportunities to clarify this study's definition of culture and cultural competence, and presented an opportunity for participants to gain a shared understanding of the topic. The floor was then opened for responses to subsequent questions in order to allow for more wide-ranging discussion. Direct questions or gentle prompts were used to encourage participation of all attendees. I took electronic notes and audio recorded each session in order to ensure the accuracy of my notes and to facilitate later transcription.

Focus Group Protocol

Thesis committee members provided initial guidance on focus group questions, and reviewed and provided feedback on draft questions. The questions were revised and the resulting focus group script (see Appendix) guided the study. The focus group questions were designed to elicit from participants their ideas about the challenges and opportunities related to embedding cultural competence in the ECE system, including the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for child care programs. The first section of the focus group script was designed to learn about participant views of or experiences with current (or past) cultural competence supports. It asked about their experience in either the delivery of or participation in any training related to the topic of cultural competence. The next section of the focus group script invited participants to consider the future, or what might be possible. Participants were asked to share their most innovative ideas for any strategy they thought would support ECE teacher cultural competence development. The next section provided examples of strategies being tested by the state and asked participants their ideas related to incorporating those strategies or requirements into a new or revised QRIS. The final section invited participants to share any additional thoughts they had regarding opportunities and barriers related to embedding cultural competence in NC's ECE system, even beyond the rating and technical assistance systems.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of the focus group sessions, I reviewed the electronic notes and compared the notes with the related audio recording. I then entered corrections to the electronic notes as needed in order to create a transcript for each focus group. I then conducted analysis on the transcripts utilizing the constant comparative method (Glaser 1965, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The constant comparative method (CCM) involves examination and reexamination of qualitative data to discover themes and categories that ultimately inform hypotheses or theories related to the phenomenon of interest (Glaser, 1965, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the researcher examines the data, emergent ideas are recorded and considered in relation to other ideas and concepts that arise. New ideas are coded and compared with those that were earlier identified, until the data has no new concepts to offer. Coded data is then reviewed and grouped into themes or constructs. From further examination and comparison, the researcher creates definitions for each theme or construct. Themes and constructs are then grouped and regrouped into higher-level categories. The raw data is then reexamined according to the identified categories to ensure goodness of fit of the categories with the data. Any instances of conflict are recorded and categories are reviewed and revised until the final categories fit well with the identified themes and constructs.

In the present study I examined each focus group transcript line-by-line for emergent themes related to the research questions. As I coded the data, I noted additional ideas or conflicts suggested by the data. I then reexamined the data and the emergent themes to resolve conflicts, either by adjusting definitions of constructs or by adding new constructs in order to incorporate new ideas. I coded each focus group transcript separately and then compared codes and data across transcripts and considered similarities and differences. As I compared across transcripts, I grouped like data, added some codes, and re-conceptualized other codes to achieve parsimony of themes. This iterative process was repeated until no further themes or ideas emerged.

Because the constant comparative method relies on a researcher's conceptualization of data, it does not lend itself to a reliability check as no two researcher's conceptualizations are likely to be the same (Glaser, 1992). Instead, this study employed a peer consensus process in which the coded data were reviewed by the thesis advisor, and any disagreement related to coding was discussed and resolved. Consensus on the higher-level categories included an additional researcher, J. K. Lower (personal communication, October 2, 2016). Dr. Lower has extensive experience and expertise in the constant comparative method, and together we reviewed the three proposed categories in relation to the identified themes; discussed the categories' fit with the data; and agreed on the final categories.

Finally, I reviewed each theme and category by research question and in relation to the drivers described in the implementation science framework and the stages described in the PTT model of cultural competency development. The purpose of these analyses was to see which of the implementation science drivers were addressed in suggestions for improving support for cultural competence, and which were not. An additional purpose was to discern which of the stages of cultural competence development were most and least commonly addressed in participants' recommendations.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Introduction

As with any qualitative research, one of the first findings has to do with the themes that are identified from the data. In this study, themes from the focus group discussions were identified as described above. Themes were then examined in order to develop higher level categories that provided a structure to the relations between themes. The categories and themes are, therefore, discussed below as the first set of findings. Following the categories and themes, findings and discussion are presented by research question.

Setting the Stage: Themes and Categories

The analyses first identified themes, which are the constructs that emerged from the analysis, the broader ideas that specific comments and recommendations from the focus group members seemed to fall under as I examined the data. The themes were then analyzed and classified into categories, which are higher level constructs that help to explain how focus group members' ideas and recommendations relate to each other. These analyses yielded three main categories: capacity, content, and system. The categories are listed in Table 1 below, along with the related themes. The analyses and the presentations of the results are organized by theme and category under each

research question, followed by a conceptual model of the relation between the categories (see Figure 2). It is important to note that the discussions that produced these themes focused almost exclusively on child care centers and very little on family child care homes. This focus reflects the focus of the current system in terms of how and where training and technical assistance funds are spent for the greatest impact. Each category and theme will be discussed in depth in connection to the related research question, but first the categories will be further defined.

Themes emerging under the capacity category address issues related to human capacity that arose from the focus group discussions, including administrator capacity, training participant capacity in terms of agency, and training participant capacity in terms of education. Administrator capacity refers to the abilities of ECE administrators in terms of leadership and general business management. Training participant capacity - agency includes the ideas, thoughts, and background experiences that trainees bring with them as well as what they need from the cultural competence awareness training. Training participant capacity – education, relates to the varying education levels that are typical, primarily across the ECE teaching workforce.

The content category addresses the need for varying content or focus of training, professional development, or technical assistance based upon varying roles and responsibilities of participants. Themes that were grouped in the content category include administrator roles and responsibilities; T/TA roles and

responsibilities; training content; program-level T/TA; and training format. The administrator roles and responsibilities theme acknowledges the need for T/TA not just on cultural competence content and the administrator's cultural competence journey, but also on support for staff cultural competence development. The theme of T/TA roles and responsibilities incorporates a similar view of the special needs of purveyors of training and technical assistance to build their capacity to support the cultural competence development of their clients. Training content addresses the many areas beyond awareness that focus group participants would like to see developed into training modules and offered throughout the system and across the state. Program-level T/TA has to do with grouping program or center staff into one training to address a topic or issue related to cultural competence development or culturally competent practices across the program. Finally, training format includes ideas about restructuring the delivery of cultural competence training in order to incorporate time for participants to practice what they learn and report back.

The system category included themes related to QRIS requirements and system alignment. The theme of QRIS requirements relates to a number of ideas and concerns regarding the training and activities that should or could be included in the state's rating system for ECE programs. The system alignment theme addresses the need for cross-system definitions of cultural competence; cross-system expectations for agency- and system-level culturally competent policies and practices; and creative ideas related to considering and leveraging

resources across and within systems to support the goal of culturally competent ECE practices.

The capacity category was the least-frequently coded category and was limited primarily to the second research question. The content category was in the middle for frequency of coding, and again, most themes emerging under the content category were from responses to the second research question. The system category was the most coded category and included themes covering research questions three and four. Taken together the three categories incorporate the themes that emerged across the three focus group sessions. These themes will now be discussed in relation to each research question below.

Table 1. Categories, Themes, and Definitions

Category	Themes	Thematic Definitions
CAPACITY	ECE Program administrator capacity	Capacity of ECE program administrators in terms of basic business management
	Training participant capacity: agency	Capacity of training participants to take responsibility for their own cultural competence journeys
	Training participant capacity: education	Capacity of training participants to engage in cultural competence development work due to potentially low levels of education
CONTENT	Administrator roles & responsibilities	Addresses the specialized training and support for development and implementation of culturally competent practices necessitated by the nature of the ECE program administrator's role in setting the tone and focus of the program
	T/TA content	Focuses on T/TA content and delivery to support awareness development and higher level implementation of culturally competent practices.
SYSTEM	CC Plan implementation	Includes ideas related to evidence of cultural competence plan implementation, as well as concerns related to evaluation
	QRIS Requirements	Includes notions of requirements for trainings and other commitment to and evidence of cultural competency development as well as concerns related to monitoring and avoiding checkoffs
	System alignment	Addresses specialized training & resources needed by T/TA community; need for system-wide definitions of and commitment to cultural competence; value of prioritizing resources & coordinating with system partners to meet needs; & importance of cultural competence in foundations of ECE quality

Research Question I (RQ1) Participant Experiences with Cultural Competence Training

The first research question addressed focus group participants' experiences with training on the topic of cultural competence. Across the three focus groups, 75% of participants (n=21) had participated in some type of cultural competence training. Of those, 15 had attended and three had delivered the introduction to cultural competence awareness training supported by the Early Learning Challenge grant, and hereinafter referred to as "awareness training". Importantly, the three trainers on the cultural competence awareness module also participated in the year-long cultural competence project described above, and therefore had helped to develop the training and had been exposed to and worked with content beyond the awareness level. Three additional participants had experienced a different training on the topic, and two who experienced the awareness training were also enrolled (at the time of the focus group meeting) in a graduate level course on the topic. Across the three focus groups, the percentage of participants with experience in cultural competence training ranged from a low of 67% to a high of 80%. The variation in experiences with training in cultural competence may underlie one or two themes that emerged from the data, and these instances will be noted in the discussion of the related research question below. Otherwise the focus group data has been combined and is discussed accordingly below.

Research Question II (RQ2) Supporting Teacher Cultural Competence

Development

The second research question had to do with focus group participants' ideas for supporting ECE teachers' cultural competence. Each focus group was asked for their most innovative strategies to increase the cultural competence of the ECE workforce, assuming no barriers related to the current system or financing. Responses to this question were wide-ranging and included ideas that fell into each of the three categories discussed above (capacity, content, and system). The themes emerging from this discussion included administrator roles and responsibilities; QRIS requirements; training content; T/TA roles and responsibilities; participant capacity; and system alignment.

Program administrators need specialized support. Initial discussions of RQ2 focused on administrators of ECE programs, that is, center-based rather than home-based programs. Focus group members felt that administrators needed training that was more tailored to their roles as program leaders. As one member noted, "It [the training] may need to be different for directors than for teachers because they're coming at it from a different aspect, I mean administrative-wise, what they need to do as far as setting the standard." This idea of a separate training track to support administrators' cultural competence journey as well as to equip them to support those of their teachers was widely supported. Members also recommended separate, targeted technical assistance to support administrators (and teachers) in their cultural competence

development: “providing that TA to help them understand what it looks in your classroom and creating a culturally competent environment and even communities of practice so that administrators and teachers can network with other people in the field.” One focus group member with experience in teaching community college courses on ECE administration suggested that before work on cultural competence could commence, administrators needed more basic support to think about and develop a philosophy for their program: “You have to start with a philosophy, and that’s not always easy. It takes a lot of uncovering and a lot of putting into words” what they believe in. Taken together, these discussions characterize a theme that would recur throughout the focus groups, around the role of the administrator and specialized support administrators needed for implementing culturally competent practices.

QRIS requirements are needed for practice change. Further discussions about how to support ECE administrators led to two recommendations for QRIS requirements. Focus group members recommended that administrators be required (through the QRIS) to develop a cultural competence plan: “Teachers answer to directors, so directors should have to answer on the state level the question of what can you or what are you implementing to be culturally competent.” Members also recommended that the introduction to cultural competence awareness training be required in the QRIS for both teachers and administrators. As one focus group member stated, “I wish there was a way that the cultural competence training would be

required...because directors and teachers may not choose to take it otherwise and they could really benefit from it.” The idea that system requirements were needed in order to drive practice change in this area of cultural competence would also recur throughout the balance of the focus group discussions.

Training modules should be expanded and enhanced. Training content emerged as a theme that incorporated a number of participant ideas during the RQ2 discussion. Members observed that the awareness training was not designed to support implementation of culturally competent practices per se, but to be an introduction to the topic and help participants think about their own biases. There was unanimous support for training that took participants to the next level of their cultural competence development: “I think the next level [of training] would be great. Like you take the first one and if you want more knowledge you could take the second one, maybe a little more in depth.” Members emphasized the need for providers to gain an understanding of “what implementation looks like, not just broadly but specifically what it looks like and how I do that as a professional in the field.” Focus group members also offered recommendations about how to improve the awareness training:

Instead of doing it all in one longer day, try to break it up so you have built into it the time for teachers and professionals to take this piece out into their actual work, use it, apply it, learn, then come back together for the next piece.

Discussions around this theme focused not only on how to move providers beyond the awareness level of cultural competence development, but also how to allow enough time for them to process the concepts embedded in the awareness training.

Two points related to the training content theme reflect potential focus group limitations based on varied experience with the topic. Members who had not participated in professional development on the topic of culture or cultural competence recommended that ECE administrators be trained in how to leverage local resources to connect with diverse populations. They further advocated for local specialists who could be tapped to share information about specific groups, “Having somebody that knows actually what this group is actually looking for as far as like child care goes or what their families promote and what’s essential to them.” This conversation suggested that cultural differences can and should be understood on a group (rather than individual) level, which was a departure from the balance of the discussion

Cultural competence is an individual’s own journey. The theme of participant capacity emerged from discussions about the individual nature of cultural competency development. Focus group members noted the value of the pre-work related to the awareness training module in that participants arrived with their own thoughts on the topic and appreciated “coming in with ideas to share, not just walking in.” The training was formatted, it seemed, to support participants to see their role in their own cultural competence journeys. One

member expanded on the idea of training participant agency and recommended a follow-up session where participants could share what they were doing with what they had learned but also “say what they feel like is missing, ‘what do I do now that I am aware.’” Other members favored this idea of giving participants a say in terms of what they needed next on their own cultural competence journey.

Align system definitions of culture. A number of discussions under this RQ2 related to the ECE system, and in particular system alignment. The first discussion revolved around the definition of culture. As one participant remarked, “There is so much more to culture than ethnicity. It encompasses family makeup and so much more beyond that.” At the system level then, the recommendation was to adopt a broad definition of culture, and this recommendation was revisited over the course of the subsequent research questions. Participants also discussed the need to focus on the continuous nature of the cultural competence journey as well as its foundation in relationships. As one focus group member noted, “At the core of it [cultural competence] especially in the classroom is building relationships, being open-minded, and talking with children and families. That is a definite way to become more competent and implement and embed it in the environment.”

Align T/TA across ECE systems. A second system alignment theme emerged from the focus group discussion around RQ2, and this one related to training and technical assistance. Specifically, participants discussed how to ensure that “staff across the system that are going into and working with

programs are also culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of programs.” One aspect of this issue was the cultural competence of the agencies that house T/TA providers. Participants noted that “it’s hard to get people to do it if the agency isn’t bought into it.” Another comment that characterized the discussion was:

We bring a lot of bias to work with us every day, our own cultural (or lack thereof) sensitivity. So how do we work through that as...a CCR&R...to even be able to train or talk or teach or lead others in being more culturally competent?

Members agreed that all agencies in the ECE system needed to be committed to and engaged in developing agency-level and staff-level cultural competence.

A suggestion was made for a requirement that T/TA staff participate in training on cultural competence, and this was widely favored. One member noted that T/TA staff “can’t just put everyone in a little box and say this is their story. You have to understand where they are coming from and all of the things that are happening.” This theme was expanded to consider certification on the topic, certification that T/TA staff would be required to earn and maintain in order to work in the ECE system: “In order to move the field forward there really has got to be more than voluntary [education] standards for everyone beyond teachers but also TA/PA providers.”

Related to T/TA training, but with a focus on the capacity of the system to support cultural competence in the ECE provider population, there was unanimous support for a train-the-trainer on the awareness module. Fewer than

50 trainers were initially certified on the module, and many of those have moved on to other positions. With turnover, many regions lack a certified staff member to deliver the training. As one member noted, “we have almost a crisis because we have a lot of new staff region-wide [whom the agency would like to have trained] and ... need another trainer and there is no train-the-trainer.” In addition to ensuring the system’s capacity to conduct the awareness training, several members advocated for electronic resources to support T/TA work: “Resources, we just need to have them. It would be great if there was just one awesome place where we could go and get a ton of different resources, a website.”

The final system-related issue in this section had to do with the current focus of T/TA services, which are concentrated on supporting programs to succeed in the present rating system. As one member remarked, TA’s are

spread so thin throughout the region that it does come down to what the QRIS requires. After this training we realized that this was a very surface-level approach and not about getting to a deeper level but just meeting the letter of the requirements.

Focus group members expressed frustration that TA’s had to limit their current focus and a desire to somehow access resources that would allow TA’s to go deeper with ECE providers on cultural competence development. “The problem is our current work with providers is very surface level TA. We talk about being culturally sensitive in terms of having books and materials and there needs to be a deeper level of understanding about what it means.”

RQ2 Discussion. Overall, focus group discussions related to RQ2 reflected the drivers of the implementation science framework (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015); the pathway of the PTT model of cultural competency development (Papadopoulos, 2006); and some of the challenges related to the present rating system for ECE programs (Cassidy, et al., 2005). The concept of administrators as supporters of their staff and facilitators of improved practice reflects the IS framework's organization and competency drivers (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015). The IS framework envisions administrators as a critical component in implementing any practice. Successful administrators set the stage for implementation by creating policies and communicating expectations, and they support implementation by ensuring that staff have the skills and training needed to perform according to expectations, either by directly coaching staff themselves or by arranging for T/TA personnel to work with staff.

The training and coaching that administrators might need in order to set the conditions for implementation or to support their staff is not, however, conceptualized in the IS framework. Along that same line of thought, training and coaching for T/TA staff is not accommodated on the IS framework. So although the focus group discussion supported the overall IS notion of administrator as the key to quality improvements in the program, these points also suggest a need for another conceptual level of the IS framework wherein those responsible for organization and competency drivers are also trained and supported to implement that training and support for the ECE workforce. The idea that system

requirements were needed in order to drive participation in the training certainly reflects the system intervention driver in the IS framework.

In terms of the PTT model of cultural competency development, these focus group discussions lined up with the notion that all levels of the ECE system need time and resources to move from a level of awareness to a level of cultural competence necessary to appropriately meet the demands of their related positions. The one departure from this trend was the discussion around connecting ECE programs to local resources who knew about various groups. These discussions seemed to relate almost entirely to immigrant populations who might be newly arrived in a locality and therefore have customs and expectations that were unknown to the local ECE providers. Although new arrivals may pose particular challenges to their host towns, this discussion about culture at a group level might have reflected a definition of culture that is limited to differences in race and ethnicity. This difference in the definition of culture might be attributable to differences in focus group members' exposure to and participation in cultural competence training.

Overall the discussions did not focus on the steps in the PTT pathway beyond awareness per se, but rather reflected a sense of urgency that members seemed to have about moving providers from awareness to implementation. This lack of alignment between the discussions and the PTT pathway may have more to do with focus group members' lack of familiarity with the PTT model

beyond the awareness level as that is the focus of the current system-supported training, and less to do with the validity of the model itself.

Research Question III (RQ3) Incorporating Cultural Competence in North Carolina's QRIS

In order to answer the third research question regarding embedding cultural competence within North Carolina's QRIS, participants were asked to discuss their ideas related to two potential QRIS requirements that had been considered by the state. First, focus group members discussed a requirement for all staff in ECE programs to take the introduction to cultural competence awareness training. Next, they reacted to a possible QRIS requirement for all ECE programs to have cultural competence plans describing their commitment to culturally competent practices, and how they would evaluate and support the cultural competence development of their staff. Both the training and the cultural competence plan had been part of Early Learning Challenge-funded activities with which participants were familiar. Overall there was broad support for these two tangible cultural competence requirements being included in the QRIS, but that support was tempered by a range of concerns including how to ensure the new requirements would result in practice change and not simply become a checkoff, as well as how to resource new requirements. Focus group comments are organized below according to the QRIS requirement under discussion (training or plan).

Training requirement as checkoff. The first few themes that emerged from this discussion fell into the system category. Focus group participants voiced unanimous support for the introduction to cultural competence training requirement at the one star or entry level of the QRIS, however, the discussion then quickly turned to participants' worries related to such a requirement. The most prevalent concern was that the requirement would become a checkoff for providers to complete prior to being assessed and not result in changes to practice:

It would also be important to ensure that, just because we say it's going to be a rule or a reg, that you have to do it, it doesn't become, yeah OK check, we did that. Like some centers that we all know and love and go into every day, they are getting ready for their stars and so here are some really pretty toys and then they are gone [after the assessment].

The possibility of offering the training on a voluntary basis was proposed as a way to increase buy-in on the topic, but participants generally agreed that, unless required, the training would not be taken. Comments such as "Is it more impactful for those that are more interested versus those that have to go to it?" produced swift responses along the lines of "for some people it almost has to be a requirement or they won't take the initiative" to attend the training. Another point of view relative to the notion of requirement-as-checkoff was that perhaps it was an acceptable starting point.

Even if it is a checkoff at its most basic level, is that better than not at all?... The perfect is the enemy of the good, and we're not even at good yet, we're just at the floor, so we have to think about whether this is important at a basic level.

Focus group members agreed that the training was an important introduction to the topic, and that even if it was treated by some as a checkoff, it was still important information for ECE providers to receive and a good starting point for cultural competence development.

Administrators need specialized supports. Other discussions around preventing the checkoff focused on the role of ECE administrators. "They just really have to buy into the fact that it's important, and I think that's a huge challenge because directors just really think cultural competence doesn't apply to them." Focus group members repeated their position (discussed in response to RQ2) that administrators should have separate cultural competence training with a focus on their roles and responsibilities, however the aim of the discourse under this particular RQ3 related to a QRIS requirements and is therefore categorized as system. The leadership track that focus group members advocated would pay special attention to strengthening administrators' capacity to support and encourage the cultural competence development of staff. As one participant observed: "We know that directors really guide the quality of child care programs, so it could be an option that maybe directors would have to take a more intense training than what staff would have to take." Other participants favored this idea of specialized training or a leadership track for program

administrators, and they extended the idea to include other resources to support implementation. Comments such as, “I was thinking about more training and access to other resources or contacts to help them to implement that and really understand what proper implementation looks like,” echo ideas about administrator-specific TA, coaching, and other resources from RQ2.

Administrators and teachers may need additional or foundational support. Two challenges related to capacity emerged from this discussion. The first concern related to the capacity of program administrators in the field:

We have directors who, honestly, I’m not even sure they know how to run a business.... So we’re going to give them cultural competence [training and] tell them to develop a mission and philosophy? We don’t really truly support them enough in that business world.

Administrators need support to succeed in the basics of program administration.

The other concern in the capacity category related to whether ECE teachers would be able to negotiate the required training given potentially low levels of education. As one participant noted, “For some people, for the level of education they have, I don’t see it being enough to have the CEU course. We’ve had people who can’t look beyond themselves.” Suggestions for addressing these concerns fell into the content category and related to possible adjustments to the format and delivery of the training. Several participants suggested lengthening the training beyond five hours or embedding it into a community college course because “there’s not enough time to process the change that needs to happen in order to internalize and be able to implement it in the

classroom beyond just ‘well I’m told I need to do this.’” Another content-related theme could potentially address both the administrator and teacher capacity issues, and that is professional development for program teams. “What about paired training so it’s not just for staff or the director its really for that team, that center as a team to sort of grapple with.”

Staffing the training. Two concerns in the system category emerged relative to the delivery of the training. First, focus group members reiterated their earlier point that additional trainers and a sustainable way to certify new trainers was critically needed. Second, focus group members expressed concern about ensuring that trainers were equipped to deliver the content, including the challenge of addressing varying education and experience levels. They wanted “to ensure that you have folks facilitating that can handle those” different situations that arise due to differing backgrounds and experiences. The groups widely agreed that requirements for trainers would need to be established to address these concerns.

Training requirements in the QRIS. The balance of the discussion about the training requirement fell into the system category and included ideas for other related QRIS requirements and suggestions for system alignment. In terms of QRIS requirements at higher levels (with the introductory training at the entry or first star level), focus group members’ suggestions related to professional development plans and additional training. One member suggested an “ongoing professional development plan for the staff and for the

administrators for how exactly they will continue to implement cultural competence.” This idea was expanded to include an ongoing review of outcomes related to cultural competence and the development of new strategies to meet goals, so the development and refinement of the PD plan would essentially become part of a continuous quality improvement process. Another related idea was a QRIS requirement for higher-level trainings (similar to those mentioned in RQ2), and evidence of implementation. The system alignment suggestions had to do with ensuring that ECE program administrators could access a pool of teachers that met the requirement. One comment that characterized this discussion was, “given the workforce and the nature of turnover, and thinking about how to sustain, is it [training] a prerequisite to work in child care? If not, you’re never going to have your whole staff at a common place, even foundationally.” In addition to advocating for the training as a preservice requirement, participants also proposed that the training be part of a sort of teacher certification that was portable and went with the teacher, thus placing the responsibility for cultural competence training and development on the individual.

Cultural competence plan as checkoff. The themes that emerged from discussions of a QRIS requirement for each program to have a cultural competence plan fell into the categories of system and content. Similar to the training requirement discussion, focus group members supported a cultural competence plan requirement, but they voiced concerns about its potential to be

treated as a “checkoff”. Comments such as “The director has to have a strong understanding of what it means and not just a checklist,” characterized the discussion overall and led to ideas about supports that would be needed for administrators to develop plans. As the discussion shifted to a focus on T/TA content, participants suggested training where administrators would be supported to develop individualized plans for their programs using templates as a starting point, which would be similar to the T/TA that administrators receive around a current requirement related to emergency preparedness. One participant observed that “it’s just like emergency preparedness where they have to take the training and develop a plan,” that is individualized, because they didn’t “want to see everyone having cookie-cutter plans.” Administrators would need ongoing TA in order to implement their plans as well as resources to support implementation.

Cultural competence plan monitoring. Concerns related to the monitoring of a cultural competence plan emerged and led to a lively and wide-ranging discussion:

How frequently would it be updated and evaluated? How would it be monitored? The culture of a center is going to change more than every three years. Seems like it would have to be monitored more closely [than the current system].

This issue of monitoring fed into a discussion about evidence that could be used to evaluate implementation of a cultural competence plan. Ideas included a PD plan that reflected a commitment to cultural competence development over time,

as well as evidence of family engagement and community partnerships. As one focus group member noted, “Part of it may be to have teachers keep a journal or portfolio, lesson plans, photos, anything to show they are actually doing the work that is connected to the awareness.” Focus group members also considered the issue of family engagement, which they considered to be foundational to cultural competence. They talked about how to improve program connections with families, and one participant observed, “How do you motivate parents to be a part of this? When they see buy-in, they see their culture being embraced by the center, then they are going to want to be a part of it.”

Cultural competence plan implementation. Concerns related to ECE program administrators implementing the plan resurfaced throughout the discussion. One point that came up repeatedly was how administrators would evaluate their staff in terms of cultural competence. They wondered what tool administrators would use to “find out where are your staff with cultural competence, what’s their understanding?” Although that particular question was not resolved, other ideas for supporting implementation of a cultural competence plan emerged, all related to ongoing professional development. One participant recommended embedding cultural competence constructs and content into all professional development including college coursework so that, as she observed, “it is a part of anything related to developmentally appropriate practices.” Others echoed the recommendation, noting that in this way the “targeted training gets reinforced because every class you go to, or training, is along the same lines.”

Group members wondered “What if local groups could learn together as a community of practice,” as a way to improve cultural competence development.

Cultural competence plans in the QRIS. The final discussion points around a cultural competence plan requirement focused on how to conceptualize the actual requirements. Focus group members struggled with the challenge of how to think about an adequate requirement for plans that would have to be individualized. Beyond specifying the categories or items such a plan would have to include, participants wondered how to “put up goalposts for what it should look like at various levels without diminishing the value of self-discovery and development and individualization.” Ideas for various plan components at various levels of the QRIS were discussed, as well as ideas for increasing implementation requirements at each level of the ratings. A single comment seemed to change the direction of this discussion, as if it provided the insight that the rest of the focus group was casting about to find. She said “because a program is at a lower [star rating] level, they shouldn’t have to do less for children. We shouldn’t have the least amount of cultural competence at the lowest star level.” Other participants echoed the sentiment: “Children at a one-star program are no less deserving of cultural competence than children at a five-star program.” The discussion on this point culminated in ideas related to redefining pre-licensing requirements, that is, requiring some evidence of cultural competence or a commitment to cultural competence development before an ECE program could open for business. As one participant offered, “this is such a

critical piece of what matters to the youngest children, that we're saying open a child care center if you want, but this is what it is going to take.”

RQ3 discussion. Discussion of both potential QRIS requirements under this research question revealed participants’ substantial concern that providers would treat the requirements as checkoffs and not change their practice. Such concerns may reflect the reality of the state’s current QRIS which incentivizes and rewards principally structural aspects of program quality (Cassidy, et al., 2005). Focus group participants had each experienced the prevalence of programs meeting requirements in the short term, or engaging in what they referred to as “quality for a day” rather than programs committing to sustained quality over time. These concerns may also reflect the challenge of conceptualizing a new and very different system while working and struggling to support programs in the current QRIS. Certainly the focus group members’ concerns along this line of discussion lend support to the latest version of the IS model (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015) and reflect the importance of system-level drivers in terms of successfully implementing any practice (Fixsen, et al., 2005). Without appropriate requirements related to the process of interest, implementation will rely on individual commitment and therefore likely disappear or at least be diminished with staff turnover.

The focus of the QRIS may need to shift in order to accommodate a more process-oriented approach to its requirements, and this reality brought up another focus group concern. Many participants wondered how system-level

requirements could incorporate the individualization that characterizes a program's and certainly a person's cultural competence journey (Papadopoulos, 2006). This single touchpoint between the PTT model and the focus group discussions may reflect the fact that most focus group members spend time every day working in the current QRIS, and few spend any time at all considering the development of cultural competence in the ECE workforce. As a result, their discussions suggest a system-level question: can requirements be strong enough to change practice and nimble enough to accommodate individual, program, and even community differences? Here again the latest implementation science framework (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015), provides a way to organize what may seem to be unrelated points from the focus groups. System (QRIS) requirements must be combined and coordinated with supports at every level in order to achieve and sustain implementation. Thus, focus group suggestions for cultural competence content embedded in every aspect of professional development, as well as targeted supports for implementation and system-wide commitments to cultural competence as foundational to high quality ECE, all combine to enable the tangible requirements for training and plans to translate into more culturally responsive, culturally competent practices.

Finally, the focus group concern related to ensuring high levels of cultural competence across all levels of the QRIS is perhaps the most lingering of their ideas. Although it was not explored above, this discussion extended beyond cultural competence and into a very melancholy theme related to how or whether

the QRIS supports equity across its levels of quality. In other words, why is it OK for some children to be cared for in one-star programs? Of course the issue of funding came up in this discussion, and the claim that with enough money, anything was possible. Could a restructuring of the QRIS to focus on processes related to quality address these concerns? This issue went unresolved in focus group discussions.

Research Question IV (RQ4) Cultural Competence in North Carolina's Early Care and Education System

My goal for the final discussion was to elicit from focus group members their ideas about embedding cultural competence within the larger ECE system in North Carolina (beyond the QRIS), or as some might view it, across systems. Although the conversations did eventually include ideas related to cross-system issues, the initial discussions were focused largely on system alignment within the QRIS itself, reflecting the vantage point of the majority of focus group members who operated within the current QRIS, supporting programs to succeed in the system. Later discussions included ideas related not only to the state's QRIS, but also to system alignment in terms of the agencies supporting ECE quality improvement including CCR&R, Smart Start, and Head Start; and other agencies serving children and families such as Early Intervention and Social Services. As with discussions around earlier research questions, focus group members displayed passionate commitment to improving cultural competence in North Carolina's ECE system. They demonstrated their concern about the

capacity of the system to change hearts, minds, and practice, as well as worry about resourcing requirements. Finally, they offered important suggestions for transitioning to new requirements and a new way of viewing cultural competence in the system. The sole theme that emerged from this discussion was that of system alignment, and the sole category in this discussion was that of system.

Practice change vs. checkoff. Focus group members echoed their earlier concerns that special care should be taken in embedding cultural competence in the state's ECE system, so that new requirements would result in changes to practice rather than simply being viewed as something to checkoff. Their passion for the topic and their commitment to improving the system was evident throughout but especially notable in this discussion. Almost in response to the myriad challenges discussed in early sections of the focus group, one member pointed out that the goal of culturally competent practices is not only attainable but also evident in some programs in the system:

When you walk into a high quality child care program, those are the programs that do a parent interview, who sit down and ask the questions, and it can be as simple as that. 'Tell me about your family, tell me about your child. Your family pictures are on our walls because we value your family, we value your child.' And those are tangible things that happen in high quality programs.

All agreed that current, tangible practices could serve as guides for implementing cultural competence in the system in authentic ways, but the concern about programs simply checking off requirements persisted. As one member exhorted,

“We don’t want to get to the point of just having a checkoff. Everyone needs to take the awareness training first.” Others agreed that self-awareness should be emphasized along with individual growth:

There needs to be a large emphasis on self-awareness, needs to be some kind of tool [for ECE providers to use] along the process. It’s one thing to have the information but depending on where they are in their mind determines what they are going to do with that information. It’s really more than just throwing it out there.

This section of the discussion concluded with participants concurring that the system should focus on helping ECE providers navigate their individual cultural competence journeys with system alignment between requirements and supports to meet requirements.

Resourcing the training. The focus on self-awareness in terms of cultural competence development led to discussions about how system-wide and cross-system training on the topic might be accomplished, (or system alignment in terms of training). As one focus group member noted, “You have to think about resources relative to the financing of the system.” Along these lines, members discussed how to approach a training requirement both in terms of trainers and training participants, noting that perhaps the training would be prioritized for direct-service providers (teachers) and not for other staff. This approach reflects the way training is prioritized in the current system, but that seemed too limiting for some members. One cross-system idea came up in a suggestion that higher education be tapped as a resource for ensuring that the

training was available to the entire ECE workforce, particularly if the QRIS education requirements in a new system would increase over the current requirements. If the majority of the workforce has to take college-level courses, then aligning higher education coursework with cultural competency constructs seemed a good idea to focus group members. Finally, the idea of aligning trainings across systems was proposed as a way to make limited resources go further: “If training wasn’t separate between CCR&R and Smart Start, for example if we could do collaborative trainings, we could reduce costs.”

Transitioning to a new system. Focus group members then turned to the topic of transitioning to new requirements. There was agreement that great care should be taken in terms of transition, with a focus on the impact to the ECE workforce: “We need to be able to articulate what we going to provide to our providers before we talk about measuring and testing and requiring and all those things.” Encouragement to involve providers in transition planning was a common refrain, and characterized by the following comment:

It would help to have some of these types of conversations with the providers because I think they are in a position where they feel like a lot of things are done to them. And that’s the key to cultural competence, that no one can walk in and think they know better than someone who’s in it.

Other focus group members echoed this idea and added that families, communities, and ECE system partners such as CCR&R and Smart Start should also be included in planning for transitioning to any new requirements, which points to system alignment to support transitioning to new requirements.

Cross-system cultural competence. Another theme that emerged from this discussion was that of cultural competence at the system level, among agencies that support and serve ECE programs. As one member observed:

I think that if we're supporting early childhood practitioners and we're in those classrooms, ... we can't help them to implement, we can't truly be supportive [if we] as a CCR&R system, Smart Start, early interventionist, whomever, doesn't have that knowledge base and they're not equally as culturally competent as we expect those teaching staff to be. It should be something that we are required to be a part of and engaged in as well.

Another member echoed the sentiment, commenting that "It's a huge workforce issue. We can't do that work until we've done that work." In order for ECE programs to move toward this goal of culturally competent practices, then, the entities that support ECE providers should engage in the work of cultural competence development as well as specialized work around how to support such development in the ECE workforce. This idea of cross-system work or system alignment on cultural competence brought up another concern for focus group members, and that was the issue of trainer and TA provider competence. System agencies currently establish their own requirements for T/TA education, training, and experience, and members were concerned that this lack of alignment might result in T/TA providers who were not properly equipped to support the cultural competence development of ECE providers. One suggestion that came out of the discussion was to embed cultural competence in a T/TA competency that would be part of a certification for that group. Then, across systems, T/TA providers would have to meet certain benchmarks on a range of

domains (including cultural competence) as a preservice and ongoing professional development requirement.

Cross-system philosophy. The final discussion in this RQ4 section had to do with how the ECE system (or systems) should view cultural competence. Members revisited the earlier theme that system alignment around the definition of cultural competence was crucial in terms of “Having everyone be able to say what cultural competence is, and making sure we are speaking the same language, especially because we are not under one umbrella and don’t always cross-communicate.” Focus group members went on to discuss the value of embedding in that system-wide definition a focus on relationship-building as key to cultural competence. Concern was expressed about the capacity of the workforce to engage in relationship-building work in the current system:

I see it as a social-emotional teacher, one that really knows empathy. Embracing families and loving children and what everybody brings to the table, that is a social emotional teacher at heart, one that knows how to apply it back to their classroom. We still have a lot of teachers that struggle with that.

Finally, despite the many challenges related to embedding cultural competence in North Carolina’s ECE system, focus group members were unanimous in their declaration that the work must be accomplished. As one member summed up “I think this is one of the most important things. All that other stuff, how many blocks you have, doesn’t mean anything if you can’t serve the family and the child.”

RQ4 discussion. Focus group discussions of RQ4 reflected many of the themes that emerged in earlier discussions. The familiar concern that care should be taken to ensure that system changes result in practice change inspired much discussion. These discussions highlight the importance of the IS model's (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015) competency and system drivers. ECE providers need specialized support in terms of both training (content) and coaching to support implementation. System-level commitments and coordination, particularly in as complex an ECE system as that in North Carolina, play a role in facilitating those supports.

The emphasis on the need for system alignment around a focus on the individual nature of the cultural competence journey, with self-awareness as the starting point, reflects the PTT model of cultural competency development (Papadopoulos, 2006) and characterizes the focus group discussions as a whole. In fact, underlying all of the focus group discussions was this notion that cultural competence is foundational to high quality ECE in general, which echoes the focus in the literature on ensuring that ECE teachers have high expectations for all children in their classrooms (Gay, 2002); view children and families from a strengths-based perspective (Graue et al., 2014); and connect with children and families in order to inform necessary practice changes (Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorpe, 2005). Focus group members themselves had a view of ECE quality not as reflected in the structure of programs but as reflected in processes in ECE classrooms, in the interactions between teachers and children and families.

Focus group members were keenly aware of the potential impact that shifting to a new QRIS focused on process quality would have on ECE providers and stressed the need for system alignment before such a transition took place. Members wanted change, but they also wanted to ensure that ECE providers could succeed in the transition. The work of cultural competency development already requires tremendous support (Groulx & Sylva, 2010; Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008; Miller, 2003; West-Olatunji, Behar-Horenstein, & Rant, 2008), so it is no surprise that focus group members highlighted the need to both ensure resources to support teachers and programs through the transition and to involve the ECE community in transition plans. These themes reflect some of the challenges inherent in the current ECE system as well as the passionate commitment of focus group members to improving the system generally and to embedding culturally competent practices in classrooms across the system in specific.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Summary

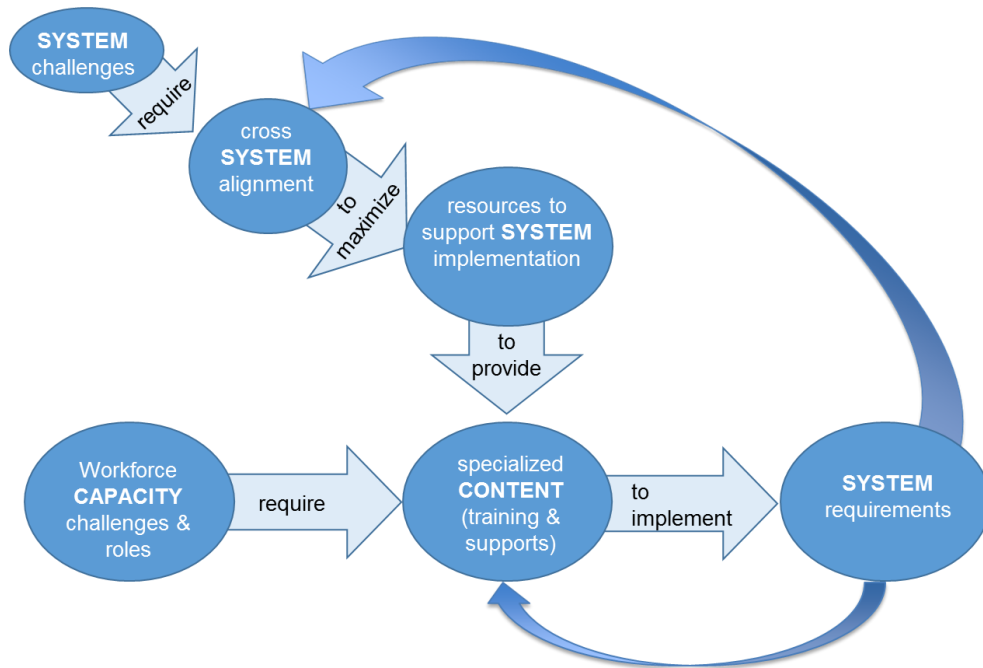
One of the strengths of the constant comparative method is that it is designed to discover the story behind the data (Glaser, 1992). This study utilized the constant comparative method to discern, from voices that are largely absent from state-level decision-making, the challenges and opportunities they see relative to incorporating cultural competence in NC's ECE system. The composition of the focus groups was a strength in itself, with both T/TA practitioner-level, regional-level, and state-level perspectives represented. The focus groups highlighted system-level challenges related to this goal, as well as program or practitioner-level strengths and opportunities that might guide future implementation.

The findings across the three focus groups were grouped into three higher-level constructs or categories: capacity, content, and system. Focus group members advised that program administrators need specialized cultural competence training and support for implementation, as well as possibly foundational support for business administration (capacity category). Training modules should be developed and technical assistance offered to address cultural competence development beyond the awareness stage (content

category), including addressing varying T/TA needs based on participant educational and experience and supporting the individual nature of the cultural competence journey (capacity category). Cultural competence training and a cultural competence plan should be required in the QRIS, and even if such requirements are treated by some as checkoffs, they are necessary starting points for more substantial system change (system category). These new QRIS requirements around cultural competence should be properly resourced, including ensuring the competency (across all domains) of T/TA staff (system category). Finally, all agencies and entities serving young children and their families must align their definitions of cultural competence and their commitment to and engagement with the work of cultural competence development for their own staff (system category).

Consistent with the constant comparative method, (Glaser, 1965, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a conceptual model was developed to depict the relation of the themes and categories to each other. The conceptual model portrays in a more accessible format the complex interactions among focus group ideas. The conceptual model of the focus group points, organized by categories, is included in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Focus Group Themes & Categories



The model depicts the individual- and system-level challenges that must be addressed in order to implement new requirements. Capacity is conceived as the ability of teachers and administrators to be successful in the work of cultural competence development, which may vary because of different education and experience levels but also (with administrators) due to roles they play in their programs. Challenges related to capacity are addressed through specialized training and targeted supports which comprise the content category. In order for the supports to be delivered; system challenges related to current T/TA focus, definitions and expectations around cultural competence; and the capacity of T/TA staff to deliver specialized supports and content must be addressed. This system alignment, also including cross-system coordination related to

professional development offerings and content, is necessary in order to ensure the resources required to support implementation that is needed to meet new system requirements. As evidenced in the model, however, one could just as easily argue from the focus group points discussed above that system requirements are needed as incentives to drive cross system alignment as well as specialized content and training supports. Implementation drivers are seen in the IS framework (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015) as integrated, with one strengths in one driver compensating for weaknesses in another driver. It is possible that in North Carolina, system requirements will be the stronger driver that ultimately produces the changes necessary to support implementation of cultural competence that was imagined by these passionate and committed focus group members.

In terms of the two theories used in this study, support was found for elements of both the implementation science framework (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015) and the PTT model of cultural competency development (Papadopoulos, 2006). One of the challenges of imaging a system that does not yet exist is really contemplating implementation. The discussions that related to the three implementation drivers were, therefore, mainly idealized views of what might work in the future. As Franks and Schroeder (2013) noted, studies of alignment between the framework and programs that had achieved implementation might be a better way to test its application.

Turning to the PTT model of cultural competency development (Papadopoulos, 2006), most of the focus group discussions centered on either the awareness level or how to move from awareness to implementation. This concentration of the discussions may not reflect a deficit in the model, but rather the group's overall lack of exposure to the PTT model or lack of experience moving through or supporting others to move through the knowledge, sensitivity, and competency steps in the pathway. Most focus group members had participated in the awareness training, and that experience both informed and limited their viewpoints relative to future implementation. Future studies are needed to investigate alignments between the IS framework and PTT model and a new (implemented) system that addresses cultural competence, rather than a theoretical system.

Recommendations

Finally, the results of this study should guide further efforts to consider changes to North Carolina's ECE system. First, there was unanimous support from focus group members for the development of training modules beyond the awareness training. These additional modules should provide content and support for ECE providers who have progressed to the cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and cultural competence levels of cultural competence development. Second, members advocated the establishment of a new QRIS requirement that the awareness level training be required of all ECE providers (teachers, administrators, and family child care home providers). Certainly this

second recommendation would have implications for funding to resource the training and possibly for alignment between systems that deliver the training. Although there was concern that such a requirement might be seen as a check-off, it might be a good starting point for transitioning to more substantial QRIS changes, which leads directly to the final recommendation. The state should investigate ways to transition to a more process-oriented rating system for ECE programs, one that aligns all ECE partners and systems in the work of sustained and sustainable high quality practices for all children and families.

Future Directions

The limitations of the study reflect the limits of the constant comparative methodology, which was intentionally selected as the methodology that best suited the nature of the questions being explored. The study yielded myriad ideas for supporting cultural competence development of the ECE workforce, as well as system-level challenges that must be addressed in order to fully incorporate cultural competence requirements in the state's QRIS. As is the intent of the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1992), this study essentially points to ideas that can then be tested in future studies rather than providing definitive answers or information that is generalizable beyond the groups who participated. First, can a redesigned QRIS that focuses on process elements of quality actually result in improved practice in early childhood classrooms? Second, could such a QRIS compel (or free) the larger ECE system to align its resources to better support improved practices in early childhood classrooms

including culturally competent interactions? Third, is a system-wide or cross-system philosophy regarding cultural competence (including definitions, priorities, and expectations) possible? Fourth, can tangible requirements such as training and cultural competence plans actually change hearts and minds relative to serving diverse populations? If these focus groups were any indication, there seems to be ample energy and interest to re-form North Carolina's early care and education system in order to address the most fundamental aspects of quality and to align the ratings (what is counted) with what is most important (what counts) for children and families to thrive in this state. The hope is that the ideas gained through this study can be a springboard for continued work toward a new vision and system that supports cultural competence at many different levels.

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APPENDIX A

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN NC'S ECE SYSTEM:

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Section I: Cultural Competence Training

1. To what extent was your agency directly involved in the Introduction to Cultural Competence training (i.e., directly offered the training, contracted to another CCR&R, contracted to an independent trainer, or some combination of these)?
2. Tell me about your experience with training on the topic of cultural competence.
3. In terms of furthering their cultural competence (beyond this initial awareness training), what next steps did participants seem ready for by the end of the training?
4. If you could do anything you wanted to, what would you do or recommend to support cultural competence of teachers and teaching practices in the classroom?

Section II: Cultural Competence in NC's QRIS

5. What would you think about a new requirement for all early care and education teachers and administrators to take the Introduction to Cultural Competence Training as part of a revised Rated License/QRIS (not the current system, but a new and different one)?
6. If the Introduction to Cultural Competence Training was a basic requirement for all programs (i.e., required at the 1-star level of the Rated License/QRIS), what should be required in order to achieve higher levels within the Rated License/QRIS (i.e., at the 3-star level and at the 5-star level? (Assuming that

7. all programs in the QRIS would have to meet the 1-star requirements in order to proceed to higher stars.)
8. Would you support a Rated License or QRIS requirement that every ECE program have a Cultural Competence Plan specifying how they would support the cultural competence of their staff, connect with families, and reflect family social and cultural context in the program?
9. If programs were required to develop a Cultural Competence Plan, what concerns or suggestions would you have related to such a requirement in the Rated License or QRIS?
10. If a written Cultural Competence Plan was a basic requirement for all programs in the Rated License/QRIS, (i.e., required at the 1-star level), what suggestions do you have for how requirements at higher star levels could be based on implementation of the plan (i.e., what should be required at higher star levels to demonstrate that a program is implementing the Cultural Competence Plan)?
11. Now thinking more broadly about the Early Childhood system in North Carolina (Rated License/QRIS plus Child Care Subsidy, NC Pre-K, Head Start, CCR&R, Smart Start, Early Intervention), what ideas do you have related to supporting or increasing the cultural competence of the Early Care and Education workforce?
12. What other comments or concerns do you have related to efforts to support or increase cultural competence of programs and the workforce within in North Carolina's Rated License/QRIS or the Early Care and Education System (as a whole or particular areas)?