

**Creating Welcoming and Affirming Environments for ELLs that Support Middle School  
Students**

by

Matthew Johnson

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Supervised by

Dr. Rosa Mazurett-Boyle

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**Abstract**

English language learners have many challenges in the middle school classroom. Among them are feeling a lack of belonging and welcome in the classroom and among their peers. This capstone project aims to present research and resources to create welcoming and affirming environments for ELL students that support the social-emotional health. When considering welcoming and affirming environments, it was found that some of the important factors to consider were student culture, family life, and classroom strategies. This capstone includes a professional development that builds on those three areas with a variety of resources and strategies for teachers looking to make their classrooms environments that benefit the social-emotional health of middle school students. Through the incorporation of research based strategies, teachers will gain the knowledge and resources necessary to make their classrooms places where ELLs can feel they belong and are welcomed into the learning environment.

*Keywords:* Welcoming, affirming, classroom, ELLs, Social-emotional, environments

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

Creating welcoming and affirming classrooms for students may be more important than ever for teachers seeking to educate English Language Learners (ELLs). Students as a whole have suffered greatly in the after-effects of the Covid-19 lockdowns and shutdowns of schools. During the pandemic, students cited that they had worse mental health, and about one-fourth of students felt no connection to school, school adults, or classmates at all (Margolius et al. 2020). Upon re-entering school, many students have better mental health and fewer mental health issues when finding support staff, supportive parents, and friends than those who do not have access to those sources (Qian et al., 2023). This demonstrates the importance of this connection to school communities for all students to have greater mental health. One of the best ways to help students connect to school communities is to create welcoming and affirming classrooms for students. This capstone project will focus on how teachers can create these types of classrooms for ELLs that support the social-emotional health of middle school students.

### **Significance of the Problem**

English language learners also need to be connected to their school communities. ELLs who find themselves in their learning, at their school, and among their classmates appear to have much greater success in the classroom than those who spend lots of time by themselves, working independently, and can not wait to leave school. This can likely be stemmed from a large number of ELL students not feeling like they belong at school or with their classmates (White et al., 2023). In addition, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024) notes that there is a higher rate of dropping out among ELLs than the United States national average. This is likely due to students becoming more likely to leave situations in which they do

not feel they belong. It should not be surprising that students would drop out or not want to be at school if they do not feel they belong there. The lack of belonging is likely indicative of classrooms being places of tension and discomfort for students rather than places that are welcoming and affirming, as indicated in the New York State Culturally Responsive Framework (CR-S, 2018). A welcoming and affirming environment is defined in the framework as "a space where people can find themselves represented and reflected, and where they understand that all people are treated with respect and dignity," (CR-S, p. 14). This environment would create a space where students can feel welcome and less anxious. Students who are less anxious achieve better academically than those who are more anxious (Anwan et al., 2010). ELLs are more prone to anxiety than students not learning English as a second language (White et al., 2023). Therefore, it is all the more important for teachers to create welcoming and affirming environments for students who are ELLs, because lowering the already heightened rate of anxiety will help their rate of belonging in the classroom and benefit their mental health.

### **Purpose**

Welcoming and affirming environments have had great effects on students' ability to be successful at school. School environments that have a psychology of success, which includes students finding success and belonging in the classroom, have a strong correlation with student achievement and success in school (Schindler et al., 2016). All teachers want students to have success in school and creating a welcoming and affirming environment is part of that, in addition to lowering the rate of anxiety, and increasing retention rates of ELLs. The professional development section of this capstone project helps middle school teachers by presenting strategies for them to use when creating welcoming and affirming classrooms for ELLs. These strategies are directly based on the literature review section, targeting student culture, student

home life, and classroom strategies to help students feel more welcome in the classroom. The literature discussed in Chapter 2 approaches topics such as school-to-home partnerships and culturally responsive teaching. Both are also represented in the professional development section, where examples of how to implement the concepts in the classroom are provided. It is the purpose of this capstone project to provide teachers with research-based strategies that inform them exactly how to implement welcoming and affirming classrooms the support middle school ELLs.

### **Summary**

Middle school students are constantly dealing with social-emotional challenges at this critical age range in their development. Creating welcoming and affirming environments is an important part of helping students develop positive and strong mental health in the classroom and at school. It can be a challenge for teachers to develop these classroom environments, especially ones that are designed for English Language Learners, but it can also be incredibly beneficial to students' social-emotional health to have these environments as spaces for them to go every day.

In the second chapter of this paper, the discussion will review literature that involves welcoming and affirming environments and the social-emotional health of students. In the following chapter, I will showcase professional development strategies for middle school teachers to use in their classrooms to create welcoming and affirming environments for ELLs. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will address important implications for students, teachers, and future research recommendations. The appendix will have handouts and guidelines for professional development.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the previous chapter, we established the increased need to support English language learners' social-emotional health, and that one important way to do this is through creating a welcoming and affirming environment (WAE) for students. As discussed in the previous chapter, a WAE is described by the New York State Education Department (2018) as a place where students are represented, reflected, and understand how to treat others. The department also includes that this is strongly related to student *social-emotional learning* (SEL). This chapter will establish many of the important aspects of how teachers can create a welcoming and affirming classroom for ELL students by examining relevant literature on the topic. First, we will examine the role that teachers play in creating these environments, looking at the way teachers interact with their students. Once we establish the role of teachers, we will examine how cultures can affect a welcoming and affirming environment, and how teachers can support all of the various cultures that could appear in the classroom in the form of *culturally responsive* teaching. Following culture, we will approach the concept of family, and examine how ELL student families' and home lives impact the classroom, and how the classroom should be a place that can partner with families and work with students who may have all types of home lives. Finally, we will discuss the classroom itself in the form of various classroom strategies that situate the classroom to fit the needs of all students, including ELLs.

### Teachers Have an Important Role in a WAE

Teachers must create a WAE that meets the needs of all students, not just the majority. They need to be ready to engage with all types of students, including ELLs, and aware of how to meet the needs of those students, including their social-emotional needs. The studies mentioned here raise a challenge to teachers of ELLs to be better prepared to meet the social-

emotional needs of ELL students and provide the necessary encouragement in the classroom to show students that they belong.

### ***Teacher Preparation for ELLs***

Teacher education programs need to better prepare ELL teachers to meet the SEL needs of students, and teachers need to practice a better understanding of their students. Heineke et al. (2022) surveyed twenty teachers and seventy students at five schools of varying models of bilingual education. It was found that teachers lacked preparation for working with Emergent bilingual students on SEL skills. Only one of twenty language teachers surveyed recalled focusing on the topic in their preparation to become a teacher. Heineke et al. also discussed how teachers are prepared to work with emergent bilinguals. The authors insist that teachers must be trained to learn about their students, citing students' lack of feeling seen and heard in the classroom, rather than generalized and put into boxes based on their broader cultural background. This need demonstrates a wider consideration for students to be successful in their classes, which is to feel understood and seen.

Some important concepts identified from this study are ways that teachers must make a conscious effort to know each student and also find training that incorporates SEL and ELLs. Heinecke et al. also state that those educating teachers should evaluate their programs to determine how teachers of ELLs can better learn about the SEL skills for their future students, so they can meet those students' needs. This information informs readers that it is important to learn more about the connections between ELLs and SEL, to see what the specific needs might be for those students, and to identify the ways to best serve those individuals and communities inside of our schools.



### *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Teachers have an important role in welcoming students and meeting their needs so that students feel increased belonging and greater motivation in their classrooms. Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that students have five levels of needs: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Zhao, 2021). These needs extend from the simplest level (physiological) to the highest level (self-actualization) and have shown that students must have their most basic needs met to be able to be motivated to do work in school. Zhao (2021) conducted a study of 100 Chinese students learning English as a second language, students were given a questionnaire alongside observational findings. The questionnaire included questions on motivation and confidence in their ability to learn English. Over half of the students answered that they were motivated by parents, teachers, or things outside of themselves, and very few answered that they were self-motivated. In answering another question, 23 of the 100 students answered that they were motivated by self-needs and wanting a future job, whereas 30 students answered they were forced or expected to learn English by adults. Zhao found that students learning a language were not motivated to learn on their own due to a lack of belonging and love in the classroom from the teacher. The study found that the attitude and words of the teacher mattered in language acquisition.

Among the main highlights from Zhao is that Maslow's hierarchy of needs is an important factor in the education of ELLs and can help us determine what these students need in the classroom. Additionally, although this study was conducted on university students, it has important concepts to keep in mind for ELLs at the middle school level. A large portion of students in this study were learning English, not because they saw the value in it, but to meet the

needs of the adults in their lives. This is just like many students at the middle school level, and consequently, educators of middle school learners can see that they must encourage students, helping them find love and belonging in the classroom to help them be successful. This study found that students must increase their self-esteem to have the motivation necessary to succeed in the classroom, and it showed that Maslow's hierarchy also applies to English language learners. Each level of the hierarchy of needs can be addressed at various levels in the classroom by creating a WAE as outlined in the New York State Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Framework.

### **Culture Has an Important Role in a WAE**

Students come from many cultures, often very different from each other, yet important in the lives of the students to whom they belong. Wright (2019) states, "Teachers need to know their students' cultural backgrounds and how culture influences learning at school," (p. 18). Understanding the culture of a student can greatly help teachers understand how to better interact with their students and have a more effective relationship with them. Teachers must consider these cultures when thinking about how to create a WAE in the classroom that can support each student. The Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework displays culture's role in creating a welcoming and affirming environment, and the studies in this section reinforce the importance of incorporating student culture into the classroom and highlight how culturally responsive teaching and classrooms can contribute to WAE.

### ***Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework***

The Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Framework developed by the New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2018) is designed to create better learning environments for all students and support their learning and growth across cultures (CR-S, p. 11). The

framework discussed how teachers can implement a WAE in their classrooms by taking steps such as changing the classroom physically to make sure "cultures, languages, orientations, and identities are reflected, represented and valued," (CR-S, p. 16), and provide multiple perspectives and cultures beyond the typical history, holidays, and historical figures. These ideas provide important examples of ways educators can make their classrooms more welcoming for students and support student social-emotional health in the process. The framework on page 12 suggests that part of creating a WAE involves SEL programs. SEL is defined as "the process through which young people and adults acquire and apply inter- and intra-personal social and emotional competencies that support them personally and professionally" (Schwartz et al., 2023, p. 7).

The CR-S framework refers readers to the Guidelines and Resources for Social and Emotional Development and Learning (SEDL) in New York State, which will be used interchangeably with SEL for the terms in this capstone project. SEL research is discussed within the SEDL framework, and there is a meta-analysis study by Durlak as cited in SEDL (2011). The goal of this study was to observe how SEL programs can be implemented into regular practice and have a positive effect on students through implementing various research-based practices. In researching school-based studies that amounted to 270,034 students in 213 schools in kindergarten to twelfth grade, this study found that compared to the control students, students in SEL programs displayed improved academics reduced conduct issues, and increased positive behaviors across a variety of practices and programs. It was also found that SEL programs were helpful across age groups and ethnicities. This analysis was one of the largest studies of its kind at the time it was published and has laid the groundwork for later SEL studies, including ones that include SEL's impact on ELLs.

The Framework gives important guidelines for educators who are looking for ways to improve their teaching to be the best it can be for each student and their culture, including ELLs. It gives teachers culturally responsive resources to engage with, like the SEDL framework and the study by Durlak, which sheds light on the importance of SEL programs and the positive effects of those programs on students. The research shows that SEL instruction improves behavior and conduct issues among students, in addition to helping students academically perform better. The important data that shows these benefits across cultural ethnicities and age groups informs educators that these benefits should also be available to middle school ELLs of all groups.

### ***Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy***

It is important to consider how teachers can implement culturally responsive learning in their classrooms. A study conducted by Samuels (2018) studied the perspectives of teachers and how to implement culturally responsive instruction in the classroom. Samuels defines *culturally responsive pedagogy* as "a student-centered approach to teaching that includes cultural references and recognizes the importance of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences in all aspects of learning" (p. 22-23). The study that Samuels conducted examined responses from two hundred K-12 teachers in focus groups of four to five people who voluntarily attended in-service training related to culturally responsive teaching that included two three-hour sessions that allowed teachers to explore the positive aspects as well as the challenges of culturally responsive teaching. The results indicated that teachers thought culturally responsive teaching would be beneficial to building relationships with students, fostering positive classroom culture, and increasing cross-cultural understanding and inclusiveness in the classroom (Samuels, 2018). According to the author, some of the challenges discussed were the unease at discussing

potentially controversial topics such as the LGBTQ community, and the Black Lives Matter movement, and how those could introduce arguments and conflict into the classroom. Also, teachers discussed nervousness at approaching topics upon which they had little knowledge, being perceived as unfair in judgments about cultures that they do not understand, and limited class time as potential negatives to culturally responsive teaching. When discussing how to implement culturally responsive teaching into the everyday classroom, the teachers found that much of it was already present in effective teaching, including aspects of student voice and participation in the classroom, effective team-building activities, encouraging a respectful environment, discouraging disparaging remarks, embracing differentiated instruction, celebrating diversity, and encouraging questioning.

The Samuels study should indicate to educators that despite the challenges of implementing culturally responsive teaching in the classroom, teachers should feel free to implement the practices in their classrooms knowing that it will greatly affect the way students engage with each other, with the teacher, and with learning. The study also determined that despite the hesitancy of teachers to engage in culturally responsive teaching, they also indicated that much of culturally responsive teaching was already present in effective teaching practices, so implementation would not be unfairly challenging. It also found that some of the components of culturally responsive teaching were concepts such as differentiating instruction, which can be used in a variety of contexts to improve student understanding and instruction.

### ***Culturally Responsive SEL***

A more recent study set out to show how culturally relevant learning can inform the development of SEL instruction. Hayashi et al. (2022) reviewed SEL research over the past two decades, the results determined that despite there being an increase in overall SEL research,

much of it is being conducted in North America, with very little being done in Asian and African countries, specifically the study examined Japan and South Africa. Overall, it found 42 studies on social-emotional learning that met the criteria, 40 of which were in the United States, two of which were conducted in Japan, and no studies were found in South Africa. Hayashi et al. also found that 30% of the studies that met the criteria were from the time period of pre-2000 through 2010, and the remaining 70% came from 2011 through 2021. The results showed that despite the increase over time, the rate in North America was not consistent in Japan and South Africa. The study then highlighted the differences in SEL Skills among the three cultures, North American, Japanese, and South African, and showed how the three different cultures have distinct values and contexts that can all inform SEL learning, despite the research mainly only coming from North American culture and stating a need for more research to be conducted on SEL developments in other continents.

By extension, the study brings awareness to the fact that SEL learning is culturally responsive by nature. Even though there are many differences in culture between North America, North Africa, and Japan, effective SEL appeals to all of those cultures, but may look differently in the way that it is conducted if it needs to engage students of different cultures. Important considerations need to be made regarding students' historical and cultural heritage for SEL instruction to be truly inclusive to students who may not be in the majority culture. Research has been progressing over time, but we still have to broaden the scope of SEL research in other countries to better understand how we can be more inclusive to students such as ELLs, who come from countries that may have different cultural contexts than those in North American culture. Consequently, an important conclusion for educators is that we do not have concrete SEL research conducted in many areas to refer to in our culturally responsive SEL

instruction, and we must understand the limitations of our research and knowledge and be learners in addition to instructors when engaging other cultures in the classroom.

### **Families and Home Life Have an Important Role in a WAE**

Students spend much of their day at school, but often much more at home. This is especially important to be aware of when considering ELLs, who are often from other countries with varying cultural norms. These cultural norms place students in a variety of roles at home, all of which may be important for teachers to consider. Studies in this section show the importance of being aware of student home lives and how they can positively and negatively affect the classroom.

#### ***Understanding Students' Home Lives***

Student home life and previous experiences can also be important for teachers to consider when assessing how to implement a welcoming and affirming classroom that supports their needs. Hos (2020) analyzed a newcomer classroom, by studying audio and video recordings of students in addition to classroom observations. The participants were nineteen 13-18-year-old students from Thailand, Yemen, and Nepal whose previous school experience ranged from 0-6 years. These students came from a variety of situations, some entered the United States as refugees and had faced violence and war in their previous countries. The study documents interviews with some students who had particularly difficult situations and required more emotional support to cope with the extreme adjustment to life in a new situation. In addition, the study reports that students also may have extra responsibilities outside of school, due to the differing family or community values in their culture. A major takeaway of the study was that students often had trouble determining expectations for post-graduation due to a lack of knowledge of the American educational system. The findings can help teachers be aware of

considerations when setting up classrooms that are welcoming to and affirming of all students.

ELLs who may be from other cultural contexts or who may be immigrants or refugees have the potential to have different needs for what makes up a welcoming and affirming classroom. These students may need extra emotional support, which could be provided in the classroom, or a teacher could reach out to another support system in the school. In fact, students may have extra responsibilities outside of school, of which teachers should be aware. This may inform the teacher's relationship with that student, either to engage with and express interest in it if the student would like to discuss it or to know to stay away from a topic that could be upsetting to the student. Students may also not know what a reasonable expectation is for their education, and not have knowledge of concepts such as graduation requirements (Hos, 2022). Consequently, an affirming environment for those students is having conversations about future goals so that students can form realistic ideas of what their educational journey and post-graduation journey can look like. By understanding what students' lives are like outside the classroom, teachers can be better informed of the people they are attempting to reach. They also need to understand the support students need to be successful, in addition to showing students that they are interested in them as people outside of the classroom in addition to students in the classroom.

### ***Classroom-Parent Relationships***

An important component to understanding what students are facing at home can be establishing teacher-parent relationships. Niehaus and Adelson's (2014) study included 1,020 third-grade ELL students and included interviews with parents, achievement tests, teacher and administrator surveys, and measuring of student self-concept. The collected data included information on the involvement of parents to schools, schools to the homes of ELLs, and levels



of social-emotional health of students. The findings showed that the parents of ELLs were more likely to be involved in their child's schooling after having been reached out to by the school first. The study also showed there was a positive relationship between school support and social-emotional distress, largely possible because schools with more emotional distress require more services. These findings are not surprising to the current study but do reflect that the study raised some important points.

One important observation noted by the authors was the determination that as ELLs' social-emotional concerns increased, their academic achievement decreased. This gives purpose to the current study, showing the need for increased social-emotional health among ELL students. If student social-emotional health affects academic performance and requires teachers to care about SEL and how it can help students learn, In addition to providing students with a healthier state of mind and positive practices to help them even in the world beyond school. The study also discussed parental involvement, which is an important resource. If teachers or schools need to reach out first to be more likely to get parents involved in their child's schooling, then that is important for teachers to consider.

### ***Family-School Partnerships***

Another study provided more conclusive data on the role that parent involvement can play in student social-emotional health. Smith et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 77 family-school partnership studies that observed the effect of parent-school partnerships on the academic and social-emotional abilities of students. The study focused on three research questions, the first one asked what the effects of family-school partnerships were on student academic performance and social-emotional functioning. The analysis found that the partnerships did significantly impact both of those areas, according to the formulas used to

assess the studies. The second question asked "What relational and structural components are most effective?" (p. 532). The analysis reported that structural home-based involvement in the partnership brought about results significant enough to report in the areas of academic achievement, academic behavior, and social-behavioral competence. Even though generally those were significant enough, the study found that other involvements such as homework-based, school-based, and behavioral support all yielded insignificant outcomes in terms of academic and social-emotional benefits. The relational components that were significant were school-to-home communication, which improved academic achievement, social-behavioral competence, and mental health; bi-directional communication, which improved social-behavioral competence; and collaboration, which improved academic achievement, social-behavioral competence, and mental health. The third question asked what aspects, if any, of family-school partnerships were more effective based on grade or ethnicity. The study found that ethnicity was not a significant factor in studying family-school partnerships and that only one factor changed based on grade. The study found that bi-directional communication was a more significant component in the older grade students, and improved social-behavioral competence among students. In fact, behavioral support had a stronger effect on academic behaviors in the upper-grade levels. By including these questions, the analysis provided a full approach to the parent-school partnership that encompassed a wide range of students.

The meta-analysis study found overall that students benefited positively from parental involvement in a variety of areas, which included fewer behavior problems, academic achievement, and better mental health. This analysis had a broad reach and although it did not focus exclusively on ELLs, its reach shows that parental involvement can greatly benefit all students, including ELLs and students of various ethnicities in a variety of ways, including their

academics, behavior, and mental health. Furthermore, the analysis's focus on the various occasions for involvement showed that home-based involvement is more significant than homework-based, or school-based involvement. The findings in this study are significant because they put pressure on teachers to connect with parents and get them involved in what is going on in class. Finally, the relational components that all yielded benefits were initiated or could be initiated by the school. School-to-home communication, bi-directional communication, and collaboration all could start with teachers, making educators a very important factor in the line of communication if they want to see the benefits from that line of communication. Ultimately, Smith et al. showed not only that a school-to-home relationship can be helpful for students, but also gave teachers specific ways to focus their efforts when developing those relationships.

### **Classrooms Have an Important Role in WAE**

What is included in a classroom can have a critical effect on a WAE for ELLs. This section includes three strategies that can positively impact the classroom for ELLs. These strategies and classroom programs are examples of ways that teachers can alter their classrooms to meet the needs of students, they can be combined with the previous sections and can aid in creating a welcoming and affirming environment for ELLs.

#### ***Positive Greetings at the Door***

Starting a class with positivity and encouragement directed at students can have a great impact on students. Cook et al. (2018) found that teachers could benefit from preemptive classroom management strategies, such as positive greetings at the door (PGD) at the beginning of classes to establish relationships and improve behavior. These positive greetings are where "teachers stand at the door and engage in positive verbal or nonverbal positive interactions with

each student as they enter the room" (p. 4-5). The study collected data from 10 classrooms from 2 middle schools, with a total of 203 middle school students and 10 teachers. The ten classes were split into two groups of five, with one being the intervention group and one being the control group. Each of the teachers in the intervention group was given two one-hour training sessions on PGD, and the control group participated in meetings on classroom management that took the same length of time. The study found that students who engaged in PGD had an increase in academic engaged time in the classroom, and also had a decrease in disruptive behaviors compared to the control group. In addition, teachers completed a questionnaire about the reasonability, acceptability, and effectiveness of implementing the strategy. They determined that it was reasonable and effective and would likely continue to accept PGD going forward.

Cook et al. study found that the Positive Greeting at the Door strategy is effective in reducing behavioral issues in the classroom and increases the time that students spend being engaged in the classroom. This strategy could be used on ELLs to show students that teachers are interested in welcoming them to class and care enough about them to meet them at the door. This practice could help middle school teachers engage students —especially students who may already feel separated by language barriers— and help them feel welcomed into the learning environment.

### ***Translanguaging and use of Home Language***

One easy way that ELLs can find success in the classroom is by speaking their home language. It has been proven that allowing students to develop their first language can contribute to success in their second language. Baker and Wright (2021) suggest given their extensive studies and research, "the most significant variable in becoming proficient in the

second language is often the amount of formal schooling students have received in their first language," (p. 628). This suggests that ELLs will have more success in learning English if teachers provide them with more opportunities to use their first language in addition to English, and not only will they have more success in learning the language, but they may also display growth in SEL skills, as well.

Song et al. (2022) defined the process that occurs when students make meaning of a second language using a previous language is known as translanguaging. Song et al. conducted a case study of two teachers, one a third-grade teacher, and the other a language arts high-school teacher. The third-grade teacher used translanguaging in writing assignment checklists and journal entries, even responding to students in multiple languages in their journal entries. The high school teacher used multiple languages to explain and teach English concepts such as metaphor and simile, as well as finding paired Spanish and French texts to work with English texts, and sending communications home in other first languages, as well. The authors found that using those strategies resulted in growth in students' confidence and engagement with the material. Therefore, this teaching style blended together SEL instruction and academic instruction while utilizing and encouraging students to use their first language.

The aforementioned research is significant because one important and simple way for teachers to be able to create a WAE in their class is to allow ELLs to use their first language in class to supplement a lack of confidence in their second language. By allowing written responses, oral responses, or independent reading tasks to be done in a home language, teachers can take pressure off of students to immediately be ready to perform in their second language. This practice also allows students to grow in confidence, showing them that they are not limited because of their lack of English or second language, and utilizes their previous knowledge to

help their growth, instead. It also allows students to make connections between the two languages and helps them identify similarities. This practice is inherently culturally responsive, drawing on students' pre-existing cultures and language, in addition to being related to social-emotional learning in its inclusivity and repeatedly identifying students' strengths, and cultivating confidence and creativity.

### ***Project-Based Learning***

Project-based learning is another important way that teachers can create a WAE for students, including ELLs. Schwartz et al. (2023) state that *project-based learning* (PBL) is a method of instruction that involves students asking questions about topics of interest to them, and then researching and answering them. Krajcik et al. (2021) conducted a study in 46 schools randomly divided in half, project-based learning was conducted in half, with the other half being a control group. The PBL teacher group was given six days of professional training throughout the year, while the control group had their normal professional development. Also, researchers developed a survey that was given to students during the study. The survey asked students about three key aspects of SEL that also were critical to successful PBL: reflection, collaboration, and ownership. From this survey, students in the PBL group consistently answered that reflection and collaboration were important parts of their science classes, which was not the case with the control group. Afterward, each group took a science assessment, on which the PBL groups consistently scored higher, showcasing that PBL could lead to higher academic achievement.

Krajcik et al. emphasized that project-based learning is productive for working toward student SEL goals in addition to progressing academic achievement. Krajcik et al. maintained that this type of learning can be helpful for students by offering them a chance to reflect on their

work and collaborate with others. These SEL skills are important to practice for students who can then lean on them later in life for a healthier mental state. Reflection practice can be a quality practice that teaches students to review their work with a critical lens to help them improve. Collaboration is an important skill for working in the classroom, as well as in future workplaces, where companies often value the ability to work alongside others, sharing information along with efforts on a project. This type of work that involves partners and groups can also lead to success with ELLs, who may struggle with certain aspects of language, and in this context group work and collaboration can work as scaffolding for students with needs in those areas. Project-based learning efforts greatly improve social-emotional skills that help students learn all of the important skills they will later need.

### **Conclusion**

There are many aspects to creating a welcoming and affirming environment for ELLs that support the needs of middle school students. First, it was established that teachers have an important role to play in creating a welcoming and affirming environment although many are unprepared. The Zhao (2021) study displayed that students were more successful and felt more belonging in their classroom when the teacher provided an environment that encouraged and supported students, meeting lower-level needs on Maslow's Hierarchy. The Heinecke (2022) study examined that many teachers lack formal instruction on how to provide SEL programs for ELLs, but also that teachers could improve when it comes to understanding the needs of their specific students.

In addition, the role that culture played in creating a WAE for students was established as well as the importance of culturally responsive teaching. The current research shows that there is a general overlap between the effectiveness of SEL programs for ELL students and non-

ELL students, transcending culture, as outlined in Durlak's (2011) meta-analysis study. The culturally responsive aspect of creating a welcoming and affirming environment for students can be a challenge for teachers but also has the potential to create a positive classroom environment that meets the needs of all learners, not just many learners, as found in the Samuel study (2018). The study by Hayashi et al. informs us that there is a lot not known about social-emotional learning in other cultures, but teachers can utilize what they know about culturally responsive teaching to attempt to make SEL accessible to all students.

To create a WAE for students, not only should teachers learn about their students in the classroom, but it is also important to learn about students' lives at home, which was the topic of the next section. The research here included a study conducted by Hos (2020) on how to support refugee and immigrant students. It also included a study by Niehaus & Adelson (2014) that found that parents are more likely to engage with schools after being approached by the school first and that students who report worse social-emotional health also have less academic success. Finally, the meta-analysis study by Smith et al. (2019) determined students benefited from parental involvement in a variety of areas including academic success and mental health.

Lastly, classroom strategies were presented that helped to create a WAE for ELL students. Research by Cook et al. shows that PGD can help students be more focused less distracted and disruptive in the classroom. A study by Song et al. (2022) displayed that translanguaging has positive effects on student mental health. Finally, Krajcik et al.'s (2021) study presented project-based learning as a way to improve academic performance as well as SEL skills among students.

This research supports that teachers, cultures, family's home lives, and classrooms can all play a role in a middle school teacher's ability to create a welcoming and affirming



environment for ELLs that supports their social-emotional health. In the next chapter, I will present professional development for middle school teachers to learn strategies that create a classroom that is WAE that supports ELLs.

### **Chapter 3: Professional Development**

#### **Introduction**

English language learners commonly feel that they do not belong at school or among their classmates (White et al., 2023). That perspective leaves teachers to determine how best to create a welcoming and affirming environment for ELLs. In this next section, I will present an outline for professional development activities for middle school teachers to learn strategies that create a classroom that is WAE and supports ELLs. The development will incorporate the main focuses from the research section, focusing on understanding student culture, home life, and classroom. We will utilize three days in the same week, each with a focus on understanding one of the aspects that affect ELL students. After the session, the learning target is for teachers to be better prepared to create welcoming and affirming environments for ELLs that meet the SEL needs of middle school students. The slideshow used for the PD can be found in Appendix A for day 1, Appendix B for day 2 and Appendix C for day 3 and will be referred to throughout the presentation.

#### **Day 1**

On the first day, middle teachers will enter an auditorium and find a seat for a professional development session led by myself. On the projector, will be the opening question from the presentation (see Appendix A): *Turn to a partner and share a time: have you ever gone into a class on the first day, and found yourself in the wrong room? What feelings did you have?* After five minutes of discussion, teachers will be asked to share what they discussed.

After a few teachers have shared, the slide will be changed and a story will be told about a professor who sat in the wrong classroom on the first day of school.

The purpose of this exercise is to make the teachers comfortable in the session while showing them what many ELLs feel in class each day. This activity shows the teachers the problem that the professional development will be presenting options and activities to solve. Even when ELLs are in the proper classroom setting, they still feel unease and a lack of belonging because they often do not have the language skills and common experiences that many of their classmates have, and so teachers must work to understand them and create classrooms that include them and welcome them.

Teachers will then be presented with the agenda for the day on the following slide (in Appendix A), before changing the slide and entering into the discussion about the purpose of the opener, and the reason for the PD. The takeaway from study from White et al. will then be on the screen, which stated that a majority of ELLs likely feel that they don't belong in their classrooms and among their peers. This will lead the discussion to the purpose of the professional development, that each day will be about how to make Welcoming and Affirming Classrooms for ELLs that support the social emotional needs that our middle school students have, and that day 1 will be talking about how the culture of our students fits into creating a welcoming and affirming environment.

As the discussion transitions to culture's role in the lives of students, the slide will transition to the one that defines culturally responsive teaching, as defined by Samuels (2018), stating that culturally responsive teaching acknowledges differences in students, including differences in student culture. It will then transition to the slide about what culturally responsive teaching looks like, again according to Samuel's research, and teachers will review the list.

Teachers will then be asked to join in the team-building activity as an example of culturally responsive teaching. The activity will last 5-10 minutes. It will ask teachers to stand up and line-up across the front of the auditorium according to their birthday without talking to each other. They can use fingers or gestures but not talk. Teachers will then be asked to sit down and be presented with the takeaways from the activity and how they fit with what culturally responsive teaching is before concluding day 1 of the professional development.

The purpose of the birthday line-up activity is to present teachers with a tangible example of culturally responsive teaching. The activity showcases many of the elements of what culturally responsive teaching looks like in that it is a team-building activity, involves working together and supporting each other, requires participation, shares diversity in the form of different information about each other, and differentiating the ways that information is presented. All of these are factors discussed in the research by Samuels (2018). The activity showcases how learning about each other is an important part of culturally responsive teaching, and that using that knowledge to accomplish activities is important as well, which is addressed in Hayasi et al. (2022) in the discussion of how teachers can learn about their students and use that to inform the way teaching is done in the classroom, as well. The activity illustrates not only the type of activities that can be done to help facilitate culturally responsive teaching in the classroom but also that the activities can often be simple and not require extensive research and preparation.

## **Day 2**

On the second day, teachers will enter the auditorium and see the opening question on the PowerPoint slide (see Appendix B) *Turn and talk: When was the time that you jumped to a conclusion about someone, and immediately regretted it?* The teachers will then be asked to

share what they discussed. It will then be explained that it is common for teachers or people, in general, to look at students or others and make judgments without understanding the complete situation.

This opening question activity is designed to show teachers that judgments made about student behavior without considering what a student does outside of the classroom can lead to incomplete and potentially harmful actions or statements. Therefore, it is important to consider learning more about what students experience and partnering with others to find out more before making judgements. The opening question is designed to get teachers to question themselves regarding whether they should learn more about student home lives and partner with parents more to inform their teaching. This activity aligns with the research from Hos (2020), which displays how ELLs who are immigrants from other countries have home situations that greatly affect their classroom performance, and if teachers are not aware of those, the students could be greatly misunderstood.

Teachers will then see the slide for the agenda for day 2 on the slideshow (see Appendix B), followed by a slide that introduces the topic for the day, how students' home lives effect welcoming classrooms. Teachers will hear about how home lives affect student experience in the classroom, with information cited from Niehaus and Adelson (2014), which found that parents are more likely to reach out to the school after being reached out to from the school first. Teachers will then be asked to participate in a gallery walk consisting of four stations, each one featuring an example student. Teachers will be asked to spend about 3 minutes at each station and record ideas that teachers could use to improve the student's experience, behavior, and/or success in the classroom. Teachers will then take 12 minutes and walk around the room recording conclusions about each sample student.

This activity is to promote the thinking process of teachers and get them thinking about all of the factors that could be affecting a student outside of their classroom that impact them in the classroom. Much of what the students experience happens outside of the classroom and teachers cannot be aware of it unless they utilize resources such as parents, colleagues, and other individuals who would know, which are powerful resources, as discussed by Smith et al. (2019). This exercise is designed to show the teachers that by giving them prompts of student behavior in the classroom and leading them to want more information.

When the group comes back together, they will be asked to share some of the thoughts and observations that they had with the group. This discussion should take about 5 minutes, and then the teachers will refer back to the screen, where they will be shown what is done for each student and the impact that it had, which should take another few minutes as they read about what the result was for each student (see Appendix B). Additionally, teachers will be presented at this point with information from Smith et al. (2019) study that found parental involvement improves student performance in a variety of areas including academics, behavior, and mental health.

The purpose of regrouping with the teachers will be to reinforce the positive effect that learning more about students through parents or others in students' lives can have. Teachers will also see that there can be a lot more going on for each of the students than they may have thought initially, and the results of what happens show up clearly in the classroom. Teachers should take away from the session that it is important to refer to parents, coworkers, or anyone who knows a student when trying to find approaches to help students be more successful in their room and feel more belonging.

The teachers will then review on the last slide of the slideshow (see Appendix B) for

some important takeaways for them from this session, consisting of how this information can be utilized in their own classrooms. After the review, they will be dismissed for the day.

### **Day 3**

On the third day, the teachers walk into the auditorium, and on the presentation is the introduction question: *Reflect upon your own time in the classroom as a student. Which role would describe you best?* [On the slide, will be listed several roles adapted from Dugas (2016) (see Appendix C)]

After the teachers are given five minutes to reflect on their role, they will be asked for a few members of the group to share out which role described them. The purpose of the activity will then be reflected upon, that it is a strategy to be used in the classroom to help engage students and help them find belonging by giving each student an individual role in the classroom.

After the activity has been reflected upon, the teachers will go over the agenda for day 3, provided on the slideshow (see Appendix C), before reviewing the previous session using the following slide. To review, the teachers will be asked how to use culture and home life in the classroom to support ELLs.

Following the review, the topic of day 3 will be introduced, which is classroom strategies that support creating a welcoming and affirming environment for students, and the topic will be reinforced by a slide, as well.

Teachers will then be introduced to three various strategies using the three following slides, as well as having oral information spoken about each strategy, as well. The first strategy will be a review topic also seen in the opening activity. A description will be shown on the slide, and the positive impacts can be seen there to go along with the description. The second

strategy will be introduced as positive greetings at the door, and that activity will be described on a slide alongside the positive effects of the activity, as well. The third strategy, project-based learning, will have a description and its positive impacts listed on its corresponding slide after the second one is finished being shown.

After each strategy is presented and discussed, a slide referring teachers back to the idea of welcoming places will be shown, and teachers will be presented orally with a reminder of the main idea of professional development, which is to present teachers with strategies and ways to create welcoming and affirming classrooms for ELLs.

To conclude the session, teachers will be presented with one final classroom strategy to use, which is a student SEL survey. It will be stated that surveys can be used to monitor student behavior anonymously and keep up with how ELLs are feeling while providing insight into how you can improve their experience in the classroom. Teachers will be handed a printout of the survey and asked to fill one out before leaving (see Appendix D), to give feedback to improve the professional development experience for teachers, and also provide teachers with an example to work with. Teachers will be thanked for their time before being dismissed to finish the survey and exit at the end of the session.

## **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

Teachers must continue to work on creating welcoming and affirming environments for ELLs that support middle school students. Connection to school communities creates better mental health for students (Qian et al., 2023), and as White et al. (2023) found, it is common for ELLs to state that they do not feel like they belong with their classmates at school. These statements emphasize the importance of teachers creating places that show ELLs they belong

amongst their peers and at school. Teachers must find strategies that welcome and affirm the presence of ELLs in their classrooms to help support their social and emotional health.

### **Conclusions**

In researching the literature and discussions surrounding the topic, it was found that there were many factors that affected what made a welcoming and affirming environment for students. These factors could be grouped into the general categories of culture, home life, and classroom strategies. By analyzing these factors, teachers can consider a variety of ways to make their classrooms more affirming and welcoming to ELLs. They can incorporate student culture into their classrooms through culturally responsive learning, which Samuels (2018) found built relationships with students, benefitted classroom culture, and made classrooms more inclusive. Teachers could use student home lives to inform classroom instruction, and partner with parents and guardians, which Smith et al. (2019) found to benefit academic achievement, in addition to mental health, and student behavior. Teachers could also modify their classroom structures and strategies in ways like adding positive greetings at the door, which Cook et al. (2018) discovered increased student focus and time on task in lessons. By analyzing and deciding to incorporate these into teaching, educators can greatly help ELLs feel more welcome in their classrooms.

### **Implications for Student Learning**

Students can benefit from incorporating these strategies into the classroom based on the various benefits found in the research. By partnering with parents and guardians, for example, we could expect that students might have decreased behavioral problems, better academics, or better mental health (Smith et al, 2019). Students might get more practice using SEL skills such as collaboration or reflection if a teacher implements more project-based learning into the



classroom (Krajcik, 2021). Students can see many different positive benefits based on what teachers would choose to implement from this research and PD, but in order for any to be noticeably observed, teachers must take seriously the practice of analyzing student culture, home life, and their own classroom strategies, and decide to make changes to their classroom that prioritize welcoming and affirming ELLs.

### **Implications for Teaching**

Teachers can benefit from making welcoming and affirming environments for ELLs, as well. By partnering with parents, teachers can see benefits like fewer behavioral problems from students (Smith et al., 2019). This would greatly impact teaching in the classroom, because teachers would have a much easier time giving instruction and keeping students on-task. Cook et al. (2018) found that teachers can also increase student attention to tasks through positive greetings at the door, as well. Additionally, teachers can learn about their students and have better relationships with them by implementing strategies such as culturally responsive teaching as discussed by Samuel (2019). These strategies can be rewarding for teachers to implement and help them be better lifelong learners and accepting people, in addition to making the job of teaching students more enjoyable through fewer behavioral problems and more time on task.

### **Recommendations**

In conducting research, there were found to be few articles discussing the social-emotional health of English language learners, and there is much more to be discovered in that area. Additionally, it was brought up many times, specifically in the research of Hayashi et al. (2022), that there could be more SEL research conducted with learners outside of North America. That research would be particularly useful for teachers such as teachers of ELLs, whose students are not often from North America. These students may have cultural differences

in SEL instruction that these teachers could benefit from. Finally, there could also be further research conducted into more strategies that benefit the social-emotional health of ELLs. There was limited research in that area, already, but further research should be considered.

### **Final Thoughts**

In creating a welcoming and affirming classroom for ELLs that benefits middle school students, factors such as student culture, home life, and classroom strategies should be considered and implemented. These areas encompass many important areas that make up the classroom experience of ELLs and can greatly assist teachers in creating classrooms that are sure to welcome and affirm ELLs' presence in the classroom. These areas can help benefit ELLs academically and behaviorally, but most importantly, they can benefit the social-emotional health of students, which is important for ELLs who feel that they might not belong in the classroom or at school. How teachers approach the task of creating welcoming and affirming classrooms for ELLs should be a significant consideration whenever a teacher has ELLs in their classroom.

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## Appendix A

## Day 1

Turn to a partner and share:  
have you ever gone into a class  
on the first day, and found  
yourself in the wrong room?  
What feelings did you have?

What if you were a professor?



Mullins, J. [@josephmullins] (2023, February 14). *Today, nobody showed up to my 8.15am class. 0 students of about 40. Sitting in the empty room* [Post]. X. <https://x.com/josephmullins/status/1625616382665564203>

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## Day 1 Agenda

- ❑ Opener
- ❑ Why Welcoming and Affirming Environments?
- ❑ Affirming culture through culturally-responsive teaching
- ❑ Engaging team-building activity
- ❑ Recap

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**ELLs were found to not feel welcome in the classroom, or among their peers. (White et al. 2023)**





Learning Target: Teachers will be able to create **welcoming and affirming environments** for ELLs in their middle school classrooms

"a space where people can find themselves represented and reflected, and where they understand that all people are treated with respect and dignity," (CR-S, p 14) - New York State Education Department




## Culturally-responsive teaching

takes into account the differences students may have within your class, including differences in culture




## **Culturally-responsive teaching**

- student voice
- student participation
- team building
- a respectful classroom environment
- building each other up
- embracing differentiated instruction
- sharing of diversity
- asking questions (Samuels, 2018).



## **Engaging Team-Building: Birthday Line-Up**

Order yourselves according to birthday  
NO Talking!

**Appendix B****Day 2**

**Turn and talk: When was the time that you jumped to a conclusion about someone, and immediately regretted it?**



**Day 2 Agenda**

- Opener
- Recap Yesterday: Affirming Culture
- Student home life
- Gallery Walk: How to incorporate student home life in school?
- Recap: What do we do with this?

## Student home life's effect on classrooms



### Gallery Walk

- Walk around the room and look at each of the descriptions of students 1-4 (take about 3 minutes at each)
- Record what steps you would take to help that student be more successful in the classroom in terms of behavior, academics, or social emotional health.

  
  
**Student 1**

A student in the classroom that gives you a lost look every time you ask him what he should be doing and is constantly falling asleep or staring out the window. The student rarely participates, and struggles with reading and writing full sentences.

  
  
**Student 2**

A student that does all of her work when she is in class, but is constantly getting into trouble in other classes and misses instruction and falls behind because of it. The student loves to participate, and often provides good thoughts for class discussion, and pays attention, but sometimes insists on being called on without letting others contribute.

  
  
**Student 3**

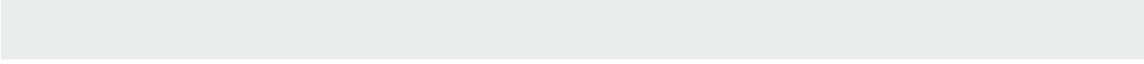
A student that is always trying to get the class off topic. The student speaks out of turn and is constantly behind when given tasks to complete independently. The student struggles to understand what is the purpose behind things that happen in class and has difficulty focusing on one thing for too long when given something to read, but excels at science class.

  
  
**Student 4**

A student who shows all the makings of someone who wants to stir the pot. This student knows what to say all the time that can set things off and get someone riled up. She is a good student academically, but just loves to get things going.


### Thoughts?

- Calling home – don't be afraid of a translator or a different way of communicating so that parents can understand!
  - Talking to the students about home or things they care about
  - Talking to other teachers who had these students last year
  - Holding the student after class to discuss what might be going on at home
  - Bringing student interests into the classroom to get them engaged
  - Team-building exercises to help students be more engaged in class
- 

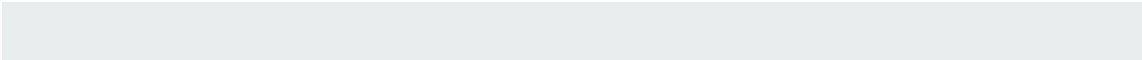


### Thoughts?

**Student 1:** The student comes into class tired every day because of his work schedule. He has to work after school to help his family and comes into school tired. You learned this from a phone call home organized by the school counselor. Now that you have reached out to the family, the student comes to school ready to go, because the family decided that the student could get a caffeinated drink in the morning to be ready for your morning class.

  
  
**Thoughts?**

**Student 2:** Student has a tough home life living with her aging grandmother, and doesn't get the attention that she needs, leading to the attention-seeking behavior in class. After talking with the teacher that the student keeps getting in trouble with, you learn that the student gets in trouble when other students bring up the issue of parents in the other class. The issue is very sensitive to her because of her home experiences. Now you know to avoid that topic to keep her out of trouble in your class.

  
**Thoughts?**

**Student 3:** This student does not like it when he is not the best at something right away, and uses conversation to avoid doing work that he doesn't like. A call home reveals that his mom is aware of this behavior, and she now asks for some extra materials to practice so that the student can finish work with more support at home, to make sure he catches up on material. After talking to the science teacher, you learn some ways to incorporate strategies from that class into instruction to help this student, as well.



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## Thoughts?

**Student 4:** After a call home, you learn that the student's parents recently separated and dad returned to the home country, so the student is going through a difficult time at home and is taking it out on her classmates. With all of the upheaval, the mom says that the student is looking for stability, but also to distract herself. Student's mom recommends that you encourage her to try out for basketball, as she has mentioned enjoying the sport in the past.

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## What can we do?



- Partner with parents: Reach out to parents or guardians
  - School-home relationships benefit students mental health, academically, and behaviorally (Smith et al., 2019)
- Reach out to other colleagues who know the students
- Find out what is happening at home

## Appendix C

### Day 3

#### **Reflect upon your own time in the classroom as a student. Which role would describe you best?**

**Task initiator** Focuses the group when needed, sets the group on the right path

**Explorer** Ask for new ideas, looks for new information

**Historian/Info provider** Offers facts, opinions, past experiences, or beliefs

**Decision maker** Decides on what to do, looks at information and plots a course of action

**Conflict mediator** Serves as a middle party who resolves conflict when needed

**Feedback provider** Offers feedback on the group task

**Risk taker** Tries new things, thinks outside the box

**Task cheerleader** Recognizes, encourages and cheers on other group members by supporting their input

#### Day 3 Agenda

- Opener
- Recap Past two days: Culture and Home life
- Classroom strategies for ELLs
- Review: What have we learned? Why is this important?
- Closer: Last classroom strategy



## **Review: Culture and Home lives**

How can we use them in the classroom for ELLs?



## **Day 3 In the Classroom**

What can we use in the classroom to create a welcoming and affirming environment for ELLs?

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### **Positive Group Roles - adapted from Dugas (2016)**

- allowing students to pick their role each day
- gives a student a role in participation
- establishes student ownership over the goal



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### **Positive Greetings at the Door - Cook et al. (2016)**

- Handshake, greeting, or positive comment as a student enters the room
- Offering a meaningful and genuine greeting to students boosted student on-task behavior and reduced off-task behavior



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### **Project-based learning - Krajcik (2021)**

-involves students asking questions about topics of interest to them, and then researching and answering them

-studies found this type of learning increased reflection and collaboration among students, in addition to increasing academic performance



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### **Welcoming places**

- students are represented and reflected

-through teachers understanding students' in their culture, home life, and classroom

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**Student surveys:**

- help monitor social-emotional health
- provide feedback and gives data to improve your classroom

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**Survey Questions (On Handouts Being Passed out now):**

1. Did you find the strategies in the PD helpful?
2. Will you implement strategies from the PD in your classroom?
3. Is there anything that could be improved from this PD?



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**Appendix D**

Creating Welcoming and Affirming Classrooms for ELLs

1. Did you find the strategies in the PD helpful?

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2. Will you implement strategies from the PD in your classroom?

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3. Is there anything that could be improved from this PD?

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