

## **Online Ready: Designing Culturally Competent and Impactful K-12 Online Learning**

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## **Introduction**

Despite the school library profession's long-standing and prominent role in technology leadership and technology-enabled learning, as well as pre-pandemic growth in K-12 online education, the ability to design and facilitate fully online K-12 instruction is not an integral component of school library preparation programs (Green et al., 2017). The nation's abrupt pivot to remote schooling due to COVID-19 highlighted this knowledge gap: school librarians had little time, support, or energy to acquire or deploy effective practices for culturally competent and inclusive online instruction, or digital environment development, despite having unique skills in technology tools and information literacy skills that help online learning flourish (McLaughlin & Resta, 2020). Some have posited that 2020's online education is distinct from other online instruction initiatives, describing it as emergency remote teaching, in which teachers are improvisational "MacGyvers" making do (Juliani, 2020). Thus, it is critical to distinguish current crisis pedagogy from research-informed, high-quality online practices (Peterson et al., 2020). The profession needs to move away from emergency remote teaching and toward a more sustainable, flourishing, and responsive vision for online K-12 librarianship.

## **Statement of the Research Problem**

While there is significant research exploring the school librarian's role in technology integration (Everhart & Johnston, 2016), as well as K-12 online teacher preparation (Archambault, et al., 2014) there is a paucity of research examining the link between school librarian preparation and online pedagogical training, beliefs, and practices as informed by community demographics and needs analysis. This research examines, assesses, and addresses the school librarianship knowledge gap on the design and delivery of targeted and culturally responsive online learning. This research is being conducted in three phases and this report of findings focuses on the research question: What are the characteristics of school librarianship knowledge gap on culturally competent online pedagogy?

## **Literature Review**

Culturally responsive programming is a pedagogical approach that “empowers students to maintain cultural integrity, while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 445). Culturally responsive programming acknowledges the strengths of students’ diverse heritages, comprehensively using “cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes” (Gay, 2010, p. 34). Inclusion of personal culture is important because classroom culture is influenced by the explicit or implicit presence of several groups: students, teachers, school, and community. School librarians must develop a strong sense of cultural competence in order to meet the needs of the diverse students they serve. Hill and Kumasi (2011) describe a culturally competent school librarian as “an individual with the ability to understand and respect [students’] cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently” (p. 2).

Emergency remote teaching has reminded society that high-quality online instruction is more than content and access but also a need for the “humanization of the digital classroom” (Lee et al., 2020). Culturally responsive practice is not new, (Bellwether Education Partners, 2019; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2018; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) but it is understudied in online contexts. Scholars use words like anthropologist (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) or cultural broker (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) to define this emerging role for educators who decipher the needs of their

learners and plan appropriate interventions and strategies. Librarians, by nature, are connectors and thus well-suited to do this work, connecting school culture, student needs, and learning goals. There is emerging evidence that school librarians, with training, can improve their cultural competencies when protocols or coursework are deployed (Hill & Kumasi, 2011; Kumasi & Hill, 2011). Given that videoconference-based online schooling necessarily inserts school culture into the once-sacrosanct home (Fontichiaro & Stephens, 2021), it is critical that online school librarians gain more understanding about their students' diverse backgrounds. Thus, for school librarians to build thriving online library portals and services, they need not only more pedagogical fluency but more cultural competency in serving others.

## **Methodology**

Data collection over the duration of this project occurs in three phases, but this report of the research focuses on Phase 1 where needs assessment research was conducted to examine the characteristics of school librarianship knowledge gap on culturally competent online pedagogy.

A needs assessment is a systematic approach to studying the knowledge, ability, interest, or attitude of a defined group about a specific subject (McCawley, 2009). Researchers collected national data on school librarian online pedagogy knowledge and cultural competency via a series of webinars that doubled as both informative presentations and virtual focus discussion groups. Webinar participants were recruited through a national publicity campaign. In total three webinar discussion groups were held: Webinar 1: Culturally Responsive School Librarianship in a Virtual World; Webinar 2: Cultural Competences in School Librarianship: Building Awareness Within Your Community; and Webinar 3: Addressing Cultural Competency: A Tale Told From Two District Perspectives, with 161 total participants from 21 one states and two countries outside of the US.

Data was collected from participants through asking questions, just as one would in a focus group and allowed for participant response in a variety of methods, such as polling with a Likert scale response, open response questions using Jamboard, and open response questions with chat box responses.

Analysis in needs assessment research is about looking for trends and patterns. Thematic analysis provides a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (McCawley, 2009; Vaughn & Clarke, 2006). All recorded data was transcribed and uploaded to NVivo. Analysis was performed to identify and synthesize recurring themes emerging from the data. This analysis utilized an inductive approach, including content analysis and open-coding, to determine the significant themes from the data (Vaughn & Clarke, 2006).

### **Preliminary Findings & Implications**

This report of the research will focus on the findings from the online discussion groups. In order to identify the knowledge gap of teacher librarians when it comes to culturally competent online pedagogy, participants were asked: “What does culturally responsive school librarianship mean to you?” Themes that emerged included: an awareness of the diverse cultures represented in the school population and community; incorporating practices that reflect the various cultures of students and community; making students aware of other cultures beyond their own; and responsive to diverse student needs. It should be noted that only 50 out of 123 participants responded to this question. This is an important finding in that it signifies that they either did not know how to define or were uncomfortable answering.

The results of this project will establish foundational research on culturally competent school librarianship in K-12 online settings and impact both the scholarly and practitioner communities. School library educators will benefit from research that informs the types of online pedagogical and cultural competency practices that should be part of preservice school library candidate preparation. Implications for practice and research will be discussed in the final paper.

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## Biographies

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