Culturally Specific
Youth Development Programs

An Evaluation Guide

Photos provided by Interfaith Action of Greater Saint Paul.

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Why culture matters in youth development programs

➡ **Youth do better when curriculum and instruction are culturally relevant and responsive[1]**

➡ **Strong cultural identity is a protective factor for youth that mitigates the effects of poverty and systemic racism/ disadvantage and reduces risky behaviors[2]**

Culturally specific youth development programs…

– Recognize the importance of culture for youth development

– Acknowledge the absence or misrepresentation of certain cultures and groups of people in mainstream schools and youth development programs

– Match the culture of their staff and volunteers to youth in the program

– Incorporate cultural teachings and traditions into program activities and curriculum

Evaluation of culturally specific youth development programs should…

– Use culturally relevant measures and tools to assess outcomes that are important to youth, staff, parents/family, community partners, funders, schools, etc.

– Ensure that diverse voices and perspectives, including the people who are directly affected, are honestly and fairly represented

Questions to ask about your culturally specific youth development program prior to starting an evaluation

ORIENTATION: What is the culturally specific orientation of the program? How is that orientation manifested in the program's values, principles, philosophy, vision, mission, and goals?

SPECIFICS: What is the culturally specific nature of the program's curriculum? To what extent are there culturally specific rituals, observances, interactions, and events that support the culturally specific nature and goals of the program? What processes, exercises, and materials are culturally specific? How are they used and incorporated into the youths' experiences?

OUTCOMES: What culturally specific youth outcomes does the program hope to achieve?

THE MATCH: To what extent and in what ways are program staff appropriate for and well matched to the culturally specific approach of the program? Are staff from the same cultural group as the students?

YOUTH ACHIEVEMENT: To what extent and in what ways do youth achieve the intended outcomes of the program?

EVALUATION: To what extent are staff or contracted evaluators prepared to conduct the evaluation in accordance with the American Evaluation Association's cultural competence criteria?[3]

If you struggle to answer any of these questions, you might need to think a bit more and perhaps develop a program theory of change or logic model to help you identify in what ways your program is culturally specific (and if that is even your real goal!).

Wilder Research worked with Interfaith Action of Greater Saint Paul to develop this Guide during the course of evaluating two of their culturally specific youth development programs: Project Spirit and American Indian Youth Enrichment.

For additional evaluation questions, please visit pages 60-62 of this report: https://news.interfaithaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Project-Spirit-and-AIYEP-report-20180531.pdf

INTERFAITH ACTION OF GREATER SAINT PAUL

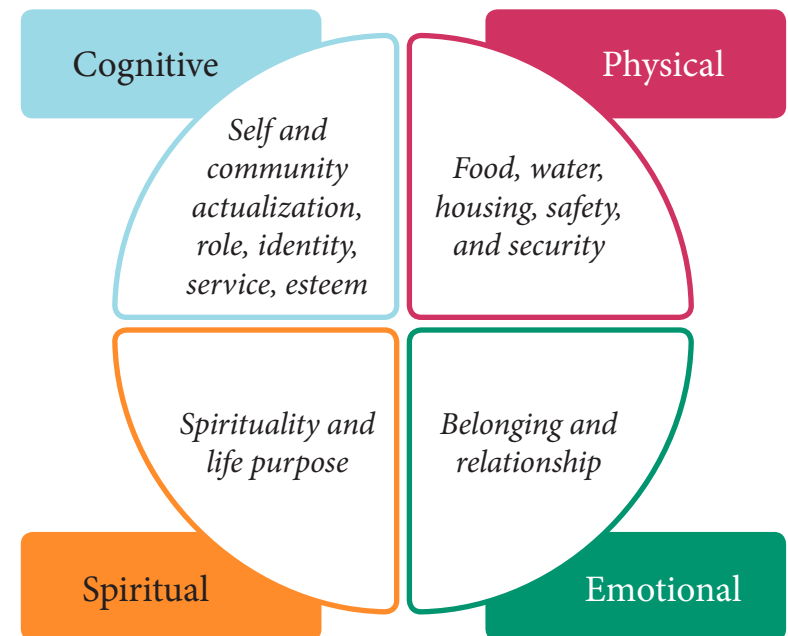# A framework for culturally specific youth development program evaluation

Many culturally specific youth development programs attend to the needs of the whole child as part of a family and community group, rather than focusing solely on youths' academic achievements (or deficits). We wanted to identify a conceptual framework for evaluation to support this whole child orientation.

Originally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs[4] was the conceptual framework we used to develop this evaluation guide. After receiving feedback and further investigating, we chose NOT to use Maslow's framework (despite the fact that we used it for the first iteration of this guide), because it is problematic for many cultural groups that do not prioritize individual needs over group and relationship-based needs.

We identified Cross's Relational Worldview model (2007)[5] as a better fit for this guide, as it situates the youth within the context of community and includes spirituality as a key component of human needs. In Cross's framework, human needs are not hierarchical, but rather highly interdependent.

This guide also acknowledges the real circumstances many youth who are low-income experience in terms of getting enough to eat and staying safe from violence in school and their community, making it poverty responsive as well as culturally responsive.

CROSS'S RELATIONAL WORLDVIEW MODEL

Cognitive — Self and community actualization, role, identity, service, esteem

Physical — Food, water, housing, safety, and security

Spiritual — Spirituality and life purpose

Emotional — Belonging and relationship

The Evaluation Framework

Cross's Relational Worldview aligns closely with the youth outcomes that we observed as we were evaluating two culturally specific youth development programs: Project Spirit and American Indian Youth Enrichment.

Cross's categories of need	Youth outcomes
Spiritual: *Spirituality and life purpose*	Youth are encouraged to aspire to live a fulfilling life.
Cognitive: *Self and community actualization, role, identity, service, esteem*	Youth develop positive self-esteem grounded in their individual strengths, qualities, and cultural background. Youth engage with culturally appropriate and stimulating learning resources, and develop a strong connection to their cultural heritage and identity. Youth get help completing their homework.
Emotional: *Belonging and relationship*	Youth develop interpersonal skills. Youth are exposed to positive role models and build positive relationships in their cultural community. Youth feel cared about, valued, and important.
Physical: *Food, water, housing, safety, and security*	Youth get help solving personal problems. Youth are safe. Youth get fed.

Consider these outcomes as you are developing evaluation questions: Is this outcome relevant for your program? In what ways does this outcome show up in your program – how will you ask about it so students and program observers will see it?

How to use this framework to evaluate your culturally specific youth development program

STEP 1 — GATHER THE DATA

This framework needs to be tailored and interpreted within your specific context. It is not a concrete evaluation tool that can be applied or administered in the same way for every program and there isn't a scoring rubric to measure cultural relevance or progress.

➲ Instead, it is a framework that program staff and evaluators can use to help assess how well your program is doing across the categories of youth needs, to identify areas of strength as well as areas for improvement.

Consider incorporating some questions that measure and relate to relevant youth outcomes into your existing data collection tools (e.g., interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, document review), or create a new tool(s) to measure these items. It's OK to modify them to fit your program!

➲ In reviewing your evaluation data collection tools, ask yourself, "Will these questions provide me with useful information to actually improve our program or demonstrate our impact?" If the answer is no, you can probably leave that question out!

Sample interview questions and responses from youth participants can be found in the Appendix.

STEP 2 — ANALYSIS: WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THE DATA YOU GATHERED?

➲ Review and organize all data collected/available.

➲ Look for common themes indicating the extent to which your program is partly or fully achieving any of the desired outcomes outlined in the framework and identify any areas where you are falling short of meeting youths' needs.

Tip: Gather your team and have a DATA PARTY[6] where you collectively interpret the data and make sense of what you are learning.

➲ Highlight these themes to demonstrate the impact and tell the story of your program – this is a great opportunity to use quotes from interviews or focus groups that illustrate key themes.
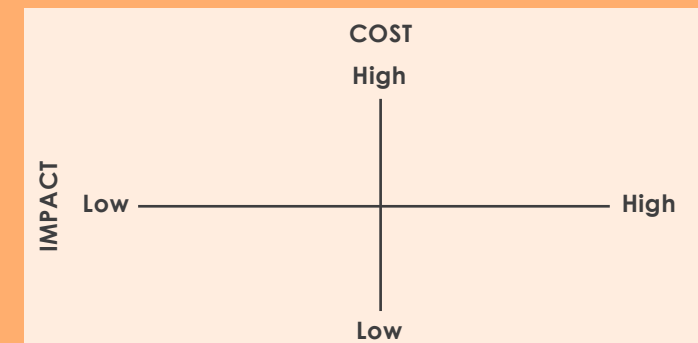
The "Reflect and Improve" phase of Team-Based Inquiry[7] offers some useful questions to consider. In particular, you should ask yourselves:

NOTE:

- What themes do you observe regarding things that are working particularly well in your program?

- What themes do you observe regarding areas that may need improvement?

- What new questions do you have?

STEP 3

USE THE FINDINGS

- Communicate with your funders and other stakeholders about what you are doing and what impact you are having for youth participants, including data that backs up your claims.

A sample letter to funders can be found in the Appendix.

- Improve your program by taking action on the issues you identified, and assess the impact of your actions (re-evaluate!).

- Share your process and results with Wilder Research and the fields of youth development programs and culturally responsive evaluation by 1) publishing your findings, 2) doing presentations in your community and at conferences, and 3) networking with other youth services providers and evaluators.

NOTE:

Brainstorm what actions (program changes or improvements) you can make to address any issues that came up as themes during your analysis. You can rate possible actions/solutions using the following grid to help prioritize which actions you want to take.

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                    COST
                    High
                     |
                     |
 IMPACT    Low ------+------ High
                     |
                     |
                    Low
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Appendix

Sample interview questions and responses from youth participants

Instructions:

Here are some example questions that a culturally specific youth development program could use to ask youth participants in an interview or focus group format about their experiences in the program and to assess if and how the program is meeting their needs.

➡ The text in italics below each question represents an example of a youth's responses (modified from real responses we heard from students in American Indian Youth Enrichment Program in Saint Paul, MN).

➡ The colored dots represent which category of need we thought each response represented as we analyzed the results.

To use this framework to evaluate your program, you should create questions like this that reflect the important outcomes of your program and the areas of need you are addressing. After you do several interviews and code them against the categories of need and other outcomes you are interested in, then you can identify the key themes in terms of: 1) areas for improvement, 2) areas of success, and 3) demonstrated impacts.

Key to the colored dots:

🟠 Spiritual   🟢 Emotional
🔵 Cognitive   🔴 Physical

Interview questions and sample responses:

1. Tell me about what you do during this after school program you're in today, which is called the American Indian Youth Enrichment Program for Indian Youth?

   🟠🟢 *We smudge. And we also, every day, learn about our culture by doing projects. Our teacher reads stories to us and sometimes we even watch a movie about Dakota. We do Native stuff, like dream catchers. And sometimes, after we read a story we do a project about it.*

2. What do you like most about this program and why? (PROBES: tell me more about that, what is it that you like about it?)

   🟢🔵 *That I learn more about my culture. And also this is the only time when I get an hour or two to learn about my culture because during the regular day, at regular school, we only get that for like 50 minutes.*

3. What do you think about the read aloud you do with your teacher?

   🟢 *It's fun. [Anything else about it?] Sometimes he reads us a book and we read along with him. We read a page. [What do you like about it?] Last year we read a book about a teepee. [Why did you like reading about a teepee?] Because it has the buffalo part.*

4. What do you think about the stories your teacher reads and tells you?

   🔵🟠🟢 *I like the ones that he picks, because they kind of go with the– well they do go with the Lakota Virtues. And that they all have a lesson, and it kind of helps you when you're in a similar situation, sort of, like during the school year.*

5. In what ways is what you learn in this program different from what you learn in school?

   🟢🔵 *During school we learn different stuff, like math. In this afterschool program we learn about culture and projects and it's fun. We also do smudging to calm us down. We don't do that in regular school. [And does it work? Does it calm you down?] Yeah. And when we smudge it tells me to calm down. We also get to drum.*

Sample interview questions and responses from youth participants, continued

6. What kinds of things do you do in the American Indian Youth Enrichment Program that help you to learn about or connect to Native American culture? What about Ojibwe or Dakota language – do you get to learn or practice that in this program?

    ● *The words. How you say one in Lakota. [Youth starts counting in Lakota, 1, 2, 3, 4. Are those numbers in Lakota? Student nods yes] I know how to say some in Ojibwe [Youth starts counting in Ojibwe]*

7. Do you think your teachers care about you? Why or why not (how can you tell)?

    ●● *Yeah. [How can you tell that they care about you?] Because they help us to not get in a fight. [Are there other ways you can tell?] Because they care for you and keep you safe. [How can you tell they care for you?] Because they help you do homework. [Do they help you with anything else?] They help you read.*

8. Is there anything you've learned or done in the American Indian Youth Enrichment Program that helps you to get along better with other kids in school?

    ● *I learned to be nice to them.*

9. Is there anything about this program that has helped you get through any kinds of struggles or hard time you are having in keeping up with school work?

    ● *Yeah kind of. So sometimes after school I wouldn't understand what the homework was about and how the project was supposed to be, so then I usually ask my teacher or my mom or some other staff that are there. I'd usually ask them, like, "How do I do this?" and "How does this work?" and then they would help me with it.*

10. In what ways does this program help you in other areas of your life? For example, do the staff ever help you with a problem you are having outside of the program, like at home or with other kids, or anything?

    ● *Yeah. [How have they helped you?] Because, like, they help you get more food.*

11. Has being involved in the American Indian Youth Enrichment Program changed how you feel or what you know about being Native American? In what ways?

    ●● *I didn't really know what Native American was like, or what it was, and then as I got older I learned that it's a really cool culture and you should be proud to be Native American, not ashamed of it. Because I know how stereotypes are, and how they judge Native Americans, and some people are sometimes like ashamed or embarrassed of it and we should take pride in it because it's a very amazing and interesting culture.*

12. Has the program encouraged you to think about your future plans for school and life? In what ways?

    ●● *They've taught us to respect the earth and stuff like that and protect people and do not bully or anything.*

13. What do you think about the fact that all of the program staff are Native American?

    ● *I like it because they kind of have more experience with it, and it kind of makes you feel better learning Native culture from Native people. Because sometimes if you have a teacher who's not Native, they don't really know, so they kind of switch things up a little bit and we don't get the correct information.*

14. Through this after school program, have you learned about any organizations or other programs in the Saint Paul Native American community? Or other places or organizations in the community where you and your family can go to get help or have fun or learn things?

    ●● *Yes. My family's very close with my teacher, and she's just a very nice, kind, warm person that whenever there's a student or someone that's having a hard time at home or they can't eat, sometimes she will bring extra food for them to eat so they don't go home hungry.*

Sample letter to funders

Here is an example of a letter you could send to your funder(s) or other interested stakeholders to share some of the key findings from your evaluation.

Dear Funder:

The staff and board at [name of culturally specific youth development program] are excited to share with you the results of our recent evaluation effort. We used the new Culturally Specific Youth Development Program Evaluation Guide published by Wilder Research to assess the extent to which our program is achieving the outcomes that this new research set forth for exemplary programs doing this work [https://news.interfaithaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Project-Spirit-and-AIYEP-report-20180531.pdf]. We conducted interviews with youth and staff and focus groups with guardians/caregivers [name your data collection methods here, talk about how youth participants were involved in the evaluation, if applicable]. Here's what we found:

We are hard at work on the two ways that we found we can improve, which are [fill in]. And we are so pleased to find that we are doing exemplary work to meet the youths' needs in [fill in areas].

Thanks so much for your generous support. We will continue to work hard for our community's youth, and we will continue to evaluate ourselves to learn how we can strengthen our program and improve outcomes for youth participants. We plan to conduct this evaluation again in [insert timeframe] and will inform you of how we have grown and what our next steps are to continue to strengthen our work!

Warmly,

Executive Director of [name of program]

Sample letter to funders, continued

[name of program] Evaluation Results

Category	Intended Outcomes	Program specific outcomes (themes pulled from all data sources)
Spiritual: *Spirituality and life purpose*	Youth are encouraged to aspire to live a fulfilling life.	Youth learn about cultural values, hear traditional stories, and experience ways of practicing these traditions. [You can also use quotes or examples of program activities to highlight these…] Youth are exposed to and practice Indigenous language, stories, cultural values and teachings, and cultural practices such as smudging and drum and dance, which strengthens their cultural identity, pride, and literacy.
Cognitive: *Self and community actualization, role, identity, service, esteem*	Youth develop positive self-esteem grounded in their individual strengths, qualities, and cultural background. Youth engage with culturally appropriate and stimulating learning resources, and develop a strong connection to their cultural heritage and identity. Youth get help completing their homework.	Youth get help assisted with homework and are encouraged to do well in school. Youth are given opportunities to learn from and teach each other. Staff support youth to work on academic areas where they need to improve and to address classroom concerns.
Emotional: *Belonging and relationship*	Youth develop interpersonal skills. Youth are exposed to positive role models and build positive relationships in their cultural community. Youth feel cared about, valued, and important.	Youth feel loved and cared about from staff. Staff are mostly (or all) Native American [race/cultural group of program's focus], and all stakeholders believe this is important for youth to feel comfortable, safe, and understood. Youth are exposed to Native American community organizations and leaders, as well as mainstream cultural institutions through field trips. Indigenous value systems (Lakota Virtues and Ojibwe Values) are used as the basis for the program's curriculum; these value systems heavily emphasize interpersonal relationships. Youth are exposed to different career and education options, as well as to Native American positive adult role models.
Physical: *Food, water, housing, safety, and security*	Youth get help solving personal problems. Youth are safe. Youth get fed.	Youth and families feel safe at the program (although not always on the bus home afterwards). The program environment is calm and free from excessive behavior disruptions, and minor disruptions are addressed by staff in a caring and culturally relevant manner. Staff support youth to solve social and family problems and are willing to address concerns with the appropriate parties. Youth get a healthy snack right before the program starts. Youth learn about healthy Indigenous food options.

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