

Culturally responsive programming for youth

Introduction

The term cultural responsiveness generally refers to an approach that considers and responds to individuals' cultural frame of reference, including demographic, sociopolitical, and other contextual characteristics (Charles, 2016; The Education Alliance, Brown University). An individual who is culturally responsive is aware of their own cultural identity and is willing to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms and practices of others (MCEAP Committee, 2017).

In the context of youth programming, a culturally-responsive approach takes into account the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of youth in the design and implementation of a program (Tzenis, 2020). Research suggests that an effective implementation of a culturally-responsive program makes youth feel safe and valued and better prepares them for their futures (Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, et al., 2016). This finding appears to be particularly relevant for youth from ethnic minorities, as they showed higher levels of retention, engagement, and prosocial interactions in activities when they participated in programs where they felt that their culture was respected (Vest Ettekal & Simpkins, 2015). Conversely, when programs are not culturally-responsive, youth are more likely to feel socially isolated and misunderstood (Larson & Ngo, 2016). Thus, ensuring that a program is culturally responsive is crucial for maximizing program benefits for youth as well as for successful program participation and completion.

Culturally Responsive Program Components

To design a high-quality culturally-responsive program, researchers recommend integrating participants' culture across two main program components: *structure* and *staffing*. This section outlines research-based practices of culturally-responsive programs that were identified by experts from the fields of positive youth development, education, diversity and equity (Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, et al., 2016). While these practices have been primarily designed for after-school activities, they can also be adapted in the design and implementation of programs across other contexts where youth participate.

- **Physical and psychological safety**
 - **Program structure:** Develop written policies and procedures about inclusivity that specify how activities are welcoming to all youth. Provide clear structure and

procedures for all youth to address safety concerns (e.g., racially motivated victimization, bullying) with staff and feeling comfortable in doing so.

- **Staff:** Promote constructive culturally based conflict resolution among youth and staff. Avoid use of language that is discriminatory, teases, or further stereotypes a particular group. Provide safe spaces for youth who are marginalized, victimized, etc. to address their specific safety concerns.
- **Appropriate structure**
 - **Program structure:** Balance autonomy and structure consistent with youth's cultural norms. Structure groups and relationships in ways that youth are familiar with or are used to.
 - **Staff:** Be flexible and adapt structural demands to align with youth's cultural background while maintaining overall structural integrity. Co-construct rules and decision-making processes with youth.
- **Supportive relationships**
 - **Program structure:** Make all communication available in the languages and communication styles (e.g., level of eye contact) that youth prefer. Have relationship-building activities for staff and adolescents to get to know one another, including regular "check-in" times and more formal opportunities.
 - **Staff:** Focus and build on youth's individual assets and strengths. Foster partnerships with youth where both culturally diverse youth and staff are viewed as skilled, knowledgeable individuals.
- **Opportunities to belong**
 - **Program structure:** Provide opportunities, including leadership roles and decision-making opportunities, for all youth regardless of background. Programs that provide youth with opportunities to make choices in line with their own backgrounds, norms, viewpoints, etc. will inherently foster cultural responsiveness. Structure activities to foster a sense of community through collaboration toward a common goal rather than competition across groups.
 - **Staff:** Co-construct activity projects and decision between youth and staff that places youth voice at the center. Assist youth in bridging cultural differences. Cultivate a shared activity identity while honoring adolescents' unique identities.
- **Positive social norms**
 - **Program structure:** Develop and cultivate program norms to integrate youth voice in developing the list of norms. Have written expectations and discussions with staff, youth, and families on positive social norms around cultural differences, diversity, and integration.
 - **Staff:** Promote culturally responsive social norms among diverse youth by focusing on equality, inclusion, and respect in their interactions with others and in youth's interactions among themselves.

- **Support for efficacy and mattering**
 - **Program structure:** Provide opportunities to connect programmatic content to youth's everyday lives or to those in their community in a culturally meaningful way so that they better understand the relevance of the activity they are engaged in.
 - **Staff:** Foster youth's contributions to the activity by asking about their interests, encouraging them to express their needs and interests, and providing them with respectful feedback.
- **Opportunities for skill building**
 - **Program structure:** Provide opportunities for skill building (e.g., problem solving) that will help youth successfully navigate multiple cultures and intergroup interactions as well as constructively handle bias. An underlying program emphasis on ethnic/racial exploration or the promotion of ethnic/racial identity and pride has been shown to buffer minority youth from poor outcomes.
 - **Staff:** Seek teachable moments to discuss with youth their culture and others' cultures, teach them strategies to bridge cultural differences in a positive manner.
- **Integration of family, school, and community efforts**
 - **Program structure:** Provide opportunities for families (defined as both biological and extended families) to be involved, get to know one another, and provide feedback on the program in ways that accommodate families' schedules and ways of gathering. Consider youth's cultural events and familial obligations in the requirements and schedule.
 - **Staff:** Be sensitive to families' cultural values and work with families to bridge any cultural differences or conflicts with families. Actively seek out and communicate with all families and other important people (e.g., teachers, religious leaders, *promotoras*) about youth's overall well-being.

Strategies for Program Staff

As evidenced in the section above, staff play an essential role in the provision of culturally-responsive programs. The list below outlines program strategies that have been adapted for staff to apply throughout the implementation of culturally-responsive programs for youth (Charles, Solutions for Social Impact, 2016).

1. **Engage youth throughout:** Engaging youth in the design and implementation of a program ensures that the program will be successful at meeting youth's needs. This process also helps to form stronger relationships between youth and program staff as it allows staff to better understand the realities of the youth they are working with and use this knowledge to inform their work. Importantly, including strategies that encourage youth voice has been a crucial predictor of positive development for marginalized youth (Jones & Perkins, 2006).
2. **Use inclusive language:** The language used to develop protocols, procedures, and materials should be the language used and spoken by youth (both technically and

colloquially). Staff should also make sure that materials are written in language that is accessible and friendly for all literacy levels and they should be attentive to and consider when interpretation or translation services are needed.

3. **Be adaptive:** While implementing evidence-based programs is often seen as the most effective strategy for program success and efficiency, it is important to note that there is no single way to interact with all youth. Thus, staff should be flexible in adapting the designs and tools of programs in ways that respond to the needs of the youth they are working with.
4. **Reflect continuously:** Cultural responsiveness should be thought of as ongoing process rather a finite task. Staff should consider that youth's realities and needs might change over time which means programs might need to be shifted in order to remain attentive to the youth they are working with.

References

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