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ENHANCING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS: WHAT IS IT, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

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BACKGROUND

Many programs for youth attribute their successes to the characteristics of their staff members.[1] Accordingly, ensuring the competence of youth workers is essential for all out-of-school time programs.[2] Past research has identified a number of core competencies for youth workers, including professionalism and teamwork; [3] however the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of youth in America requires practitioners to add another competency to the list: cultural competency. This brief discusses the elements of cultural competence and its significance for out-of-school time programs. In addition, it provides suggestions to practitioners for developing cultural competence and incorporating culturally competent activities into their programs in order to benefit youth from a wide range of backgrounds.

WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Cultural competence is the ability to work and respond in a manner that acknowledges and respects individuals' culturally-based beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and customs.[4]

- Cultural competence is a skill that practitioners can develop at both individual and organizational levels in order to work effectively with children, adolescents, and parents from diverse racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Cultural competence is not composed of merely attitudes or sensibilities; cultural competence is defined by actions and altered behaviors that accompany respectful understanding.
- Developing cultural competence is a long-term process.[5] Accordingly, cultural competence cannot necessarily be achieved through compartmentalized instruction sessions or interventions – it must be honed through perpetual individual and institutional efforts in order to be effectively employed.[6]
- Practitioners in organizations seeking to develop cultural competence may find the "Cultural Competence Continuum" developed by the National Center for Cultural Competence useful for determining how programming might be evolved in order to better serve multicultural populations.[7] The continuum maps various skills and attributes of programs from "Cultural Destructiveness," which purposely acknowledges or allows only one way of being, to "Cultural Proficiency," which proactively promotes relationships among diverse groups while adapting to the shifting needs and differences of individuals and stakeholders.[8]

WHY WORK TO ACHIEVE CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN YOUR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM?

- **Changes in the composition of out-of-school time program participants necessitate adaptable programming.** The United States has long been a center for diversity of ethnicity and experience, but the effects of the contemporary immigration boom have echoed through schools and community programs alike, compelling adjustments in the manner that educators and practitioners interact with and understand their students.[9] Currently, more than 20 percent of children in the U.S. are born to immigrant parents,[10,11] and it is projected that by, 2010, students of color will comprise 50 percent of children in K-12 public schools.[12,13]

However, white, middle-class, English speakers will continue to make up the vast majority of teachers and childcare providers for at least the next several years. These circumstances, among others, compel practitioners to develop authentic understandings of the cultural contexts in which youth reside and develop, so that they can plan their programs according to the risk and protective factors in children's backgrounds.[14]

- **Culture and ethnicity are assets.** Cultural competence is especially important for practitioners' conceptions of youth. Culturally competent practitioners understand that, while risk factors are indeed associated with cultural and socio-demographic status, children's backgrounds are potential assets. For example, two studies examining drug use among African American and Puerto Rican adolescents found that knowledge of cultural history and ethnic identity diminished drug use.[15] Accordingly, it should not be assumed that acculturation is more important that maintaining a cultural identity.

- **The benefits to youth who attend culturally competent programs are numerous**. Programs high in cultural competence are able to incorporate youths' ideas and values into their activities and structures. In turn, this collaboration with youth will serve to increase youths' enjoyment of programs and encourage their continued involvement and attendance.[16] Youth who attend programs that are culturally inclusive and whose staffers are culturally competent will be more likely to understand their own backgrounds and the backgrounds of others based on positive assets and the benefits of diversity.[17] Moreover, culturally competent practitioners will be more adept at adopting multicultural elements into their programming as opposed to employing only mono-cultural outlooks, which tend to disregard the value of diversity. Multicultural education has the potential to promote healthier psychosocial development for youth of all cultures throughout childhood and adolescence.[18] Ultimately, youth will be better prepared to enter a multi-cultural workforce and society.

HOW CAN YOUR PROGRAM BUILD CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Both programs and individuals can strive towards cultural competence through self-evaluation and perpetual adaptation. Incorporating activities and materials into programs that prompt youth and practitioners to transcend their own cultural comfort levels will help individuals at all levels to communicate and develop more effectively. Below are suggestions for how practitioners and programs can build cultural competence.[19, 20]

For Practitioners:

- *Gain knowledge about how your own culture influences you.* Many people have a tendency to view culture as something unique to others. In order to more fully understand one another, it is necessary to reflect on how culture influences you, as well as how it influences others.
  - **How?** Time and self-reflection are the critical ingredients for determining how your cultural background may influence your interactions with youth and families, but there are also concrete activities that either you or your program as a whole can do. One activity that can be completed as a group is to participate in a "breaking social norms" experiment. Individuals choose one behavior that is expected in their own society or culture and perform a (legal) action that goes against that behavior. After doing so, individuals then report back to the group on how it made them feel. Examples of this can include facing into an elevator, close talking, or sitting down with strangers in a public place. Breaking a social norm is one way to gain insight into how culturally-based behaviors and expectations influence comfort level and interactions.[21]
- *Develop knowledge of other cultures that go beyond simplistic stereotypes and assessments.* While stereotypes are common and may seem accurate, they can be debilitating in many situations.[22]
  - **How?** Surpass your stereotypes by becoming an active learner. Examine your own biases and ask questions, seek answers, and investigate assumptions in order to gain real awareness.[23] Interact with youth in their own neighborhoods and homes to meet them where they are most comfortable.
- *Open communication between yourself and the parents of your participants.* Linguistic and cultural barriers can make communication difficult and can lead to misunderstandings and lack of interaction. Taking the first step towards opening communication is helpful for getting to know your participants and their families.

- **How?** Encourage parents' participation in your programs and engage them in conversations when they do participate. Research suggests that e-mail to parents directly or e-mail through youth to parents, as well as handouts translated into the languages of participants' parents can be useful tools for communicating with parents for whom English is not their first language.[24]

For Programs:

- *Acknowledge differences and affirm your commitments.* Diversity, discrimination, and discomfort should not be taboo topics in educational settings.[25]
  - **How?** Ensure that your staff is comfortable discussing divisive issues of race and culture through in-service trainings and resources. Publicly affirm your program's commitment to cultural competence in program literature and when discussing its mission.
- *Encourage youth and adults from varied backgrounds to collaborate to reach common goals*. Encouraging youth to work together is the most effective way to ensure the development of inter-cultural relationships.[26]
  - **How?** Engage children and adolescents in "Project-Based Education."[27] This format goes beyond "fun activities" and encourages youth to collaborate on social service programs that are important to them and helpful to their communities. By involving program participants in projects that demand collaboration across cultures, they will not only learn to work as a team with those who are different from themselves, but they will also experience success in aiding their communities.[28]
- *Include leaders, volunteers, and practitioners from a variety of backgrounds*.
  - **How?** Establish mentoring relationships between adults and students.[29,30] Bring in speakers and visitors from the community, and find volunteers or pay employees from various cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual, linguistic, and religious backgrounds or orientations to raise cultural competence for program staff and participants.
- *Incorporate traditional elements from a number of cultures*.
  - **How?** Ensure that materials in your program include multicultural books, games, and posters that reflect a diversity of experience. Model willingness to participate in traditions and discuss ideas that are different from yours and from the dominant culture.
  - Host events that celebrate diversity and highlight specific cultures.
- *Support exploration of cultural identity among children and adolescents and seek to understand them through their own self-definitions*.
  - **How?** Obtain a variety of books and resources for your program that reflect open views about identity, diversity, and cultural issues. Engage children and adolescents in conversations about how they see themselves and their place in the world and then suggest additional resources for them.
- *Conduct evaluations and hold your program accountable.*
  - **How?** Examine how the social, demographic, and economic make-up of your program reflects that of your community and state. This will provide you with knowledge of how program participants fit within and experience their immediate environments based on their culture.
  - In addition, your program can conduct small-scale confidential surveys of your students to find out whether they are comfortable in your program, with their peers, and with staff members, so that you can understand whether and which groups are benefiting and which groups may be marginalized.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

Culture is defined in numerous ways across settings, disciplines, and the media, but the overarching theme is one that emphasizes a core set of values, customs, and interpersonal styles that influence individuals' behavior. However, while students in your program do belong to certain groups, many may not belong to any one culture.[31] Therefore, out-of-school time programs have the opportunity not only to model cultural competence and value multiculturalism but also to impart these increasingly important skills and values on to their participants. Educating youth workers in cultural competency is the first step towards socializing children to be socially conscious, open-minded community members.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Enhancing cultural competence does not always necessitate overarching shifts in program activities or structure. Many out-of-school time programs across the country are taking steps toward achieving cultural competence through a variety of methods. The following are examples of what some programs have done.

Program: CentroNía – Washington, DC
Method: In 2002, Calvary Bilingual Multicultural Learning Center adopted the new name CentroNía (a blend of Spanish, Swahili, and Esperanto) in order to better reflect its commitment to multicultural, bilingual education. The name CentroNía means, "growing, learning, leading" in a blend of Spanish, Swahili, and Esperanto – a title created to reflect the universal and inclusive quality of the program.

Program: Boys and Girls Club of America (BGCA) – National Organization
Method: In 2005, partnering with Allstate Insurance Co., the BGCA initiated a diversity education program called "Youth for Unity," designed to combat prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination. The goals of the new program are to help youth appreciate their own heritage while embracing and understanding the backgrounds of others.

Program: Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Care – Washington, DC
Method: Founded in 1988, Mary's Center has been providing care to mothers, teens, and children for 18 years. In that time, the Center has expanded its staff so that its teams of providers can offer a variety of services in Spanish, English, Ethiopian, Vietnamese, and French. In addition, Mary's Center has developed a teen program that coordinates mentoring relationships between adolescents and older community members from diverse backgrounds.

Program: Summerbridge Manchester at the Derryfield School – Manchester, NH
Method: Summerbridge is an academic program that brings together students and teachers who together, speak approximately 23 languages. Despite the relative homogeneity of the state of New Hampshire, 55% of Summerbridge students are the children of immigrants. The program has transitioned to build cultural competence in its students and teachers through language classes, theme days, cultural performances, and the use of interpreters for parents who do not speak English.

Program: Teaching for Change: Tellin' Stories – Washington, DC
Method: Although Tellin' Stories is primarily a parent program, its methods and use of multiculturalism in education provide excellent examples of cultural competence. For instance, Tellin' Stories runs a Story Quilting Series in which parents each create quilt squares that represent where they come from or a story from their backgrounds. In addition, this program offers a diverse group of parents and children chances to collaborate and take action to generate change in their schools and communities. Also, Tellin' Stories presents workshops on topics such as "Affirming Cultural Identity Through Sharing Stories" and "Parent Advocacy: Asking the Right Questions."

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM

The following resources may be useful for developing cultural competence in your out-of-school time program:

- Barrera, R., Thompson, V. & Dressman, M. (1997). *Kaleidoscope: A multicultural booklist for grades K-8.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
  This bibliography offers a guide to compelling multicultural literature for children and youth. Each of the 600 non-fiction and fiction texts annotated in this guide emphasizes the experiences of various groups and traditions.

- Lynch, E. W. & Hanson, M. J. (2004). *Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: A Guide for Working With Children and Their Families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
  This text offers both broad and in-depth information about cultural competence and its development in social service and out-of-school time programs.

- Messina, S. (1994). A youth leader's guide to building cultural competence. Report. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth.
  Available online at: http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/PUBLICATIONS/catalog.htm
  This guide offers a four-step model for building the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to reach all groups of young people. Focuses on African American, Latino, homosexual, and bisexual teens.

- National Youth Development Learning Network. (2006). *Youth Worker News.*
  Available online at: http://www.nydic.org/nydic/index.html
  This online journal offers regular suggestions for practitioners on a variety of program-related issues and is especially attuned to matters of culture and diversity.

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