

Four Practices for Culturally Grounded Programs for Indigenous Youth



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes practices to support the design, development, and evaluation of culturally grounded programs for Indigenous youth.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Culturally grounded programs are built from the ground up, with a foundation in the cultural values, practices, and worldviews of the Indigenous populations they intend to serve.¹ These programs are designed to boost mental and physical health and wellbeing among Indigenous youth, as well as foster cultural identity, which can improve self-esteem and build resilience.² Culturally grounded programs enable a holistic, strength-based response to needs that result from the impacts of systemic oppression.

Elders are Indigenous community leaders who have been given a special status due to their knowledge, wisdom, and age.³

Indigenous communities around the world are numerous, and each group has specific cultural practices and norms. Indigenous peoples face systemic oppression that is historical *and* ongoing. In what is known as Canada, **Indigenous youth** identify as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identities and experiences are not the same and cannot be treated as such.⁴

CULTURALLY GROUNDED PROGRAMS: SEVEN EXAMPLES

This Evidence Brief is supported by findings from seven culturally grounded programs for Indigenous youth in a variety of contexts; six are located across what is known as North America, and one is located in what is known as Australia (see specific location references in parentheses).

01. Elders' Resilience Curriculum (Eastern Arizona, United States): Developed as a suicide intervention program for the White Mountain Apache Tribe, this curriculum highlights and celebrates Apache culture and is facilitated by a council of Elders who visit local Apache schools. The curriculum has been effective in lowering suicide rates among youth.⁵

02. Ho'ouana Pono Curriculum (Rural Hawaii, United States): This curriculum is a nine-lesson program designed as a preventative substance use intervention for rural Native Hawaiian youth. The program develops resistance skills through the use of video vignettes and facilitated learning.⁶

03. Inner-City Primary Care Clinic (Western Canada): More than 300 Indigenous patients at a primary care clinic regularly met with one or more Elders, who provided mentorship through one-on-one visits and group cultural teachings and ceremonies.⁷

04. Ḵts'iẖṯa Project (Northwest Territories, Canada): Ḵts'iẖṯa is 'we light the fire' in the Tłı̄cẖ language. This five-day program, focused on harnessing creative arts to build cultural identity and pride, was held with Tłı̄cẖ youth.⁸

05. Native Spirit (Arizona, United States): Over the course of 10 sessions, Indigenous adolescents living on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community connected to their heritage through culturally relevant activities in after-school programming.^{2,9}

06. Pathways (Northern Arizona, United States): An after-school program that integrates substance use prevention with culturally grounded content to promote life skills that foster personal growth and overall wellness.¹

07. Wiradjuri Language Classes (New South Wales, Australia): This program introduced the Wiradjuri Indigenous language, cultural, and local heritage to schools and school communities, increasing awareness and pride and reducing racism within the schools, the impacts of which extended to the wider community.¹⁰

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FOUR PRACTICES FOR CULTURALLY GROUNDED PROGRAMS FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH

01. Identify the needs of youth in the context of their communities.

As the term 'Indigenous' refers to a wide range of diverse cultural identities, culturally grounded programs must be customized for the specific community that is being engaged.

Different communities have different needs; meaningfully consult and collaborate with community leaders at every step of the process in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating programs. Needs should be clearly identified, outlined, and understood. For example, the Ho'ouna Pono Curriculum was created with a specific community in mind: rural Native Hawaiian youth, who were identified as having higher rates of substance use.⁶ The development of the Elders' Resilience Curriculum was also a specific and targeted response to the increased risk of suicide for Apache youth.⁵

Remember that communities are not necessarily synonymous with specific Indigenous ethnic groups; programs such as Native Spirit were developed and implemented in Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community with two distinct ethnic groups, Akimel O'odham and Xalychidom Piipaash,² whereas the program Ḵts'iẖṯa was directed towards Tłı̄cẖ youth in Behchoḵ, Northwest Territories.⁸

02. Integrate cultural traditions, art, and languages.

When designing a culturally grounded program, identify relevant cultural practices and teachings that can be highlighted in program sessions. For example, each of the 10 Native Spirit program sessions focused on a pre-selected cultural value (e.g., responsibility) and an associated practice (e.g., planting seeds).⁹ This allowed children and youth to apply values to practice, enhancing their experience and recall of each session. Participants were able to foster a stronger sense of community by focusing on the cultural ties that made them similar to their peers, including language, cultural history, and cultural activities.⁹

Introduction to, and further familiarization of, the cultural practices and art of Indigenous cultures also proved to boost self-esteem, cultural identity, and resilience among Native Spirit participants. Adolescents not only reported increased interest in exploring their cultural identities, but they also showed a significant increase in self-esteem and resilience in further learning their cultural language.⁹ KQts'iihtla also increased resilience for youth, who reported feeling connected to and moved by creative art forms⁸ and wanted to continue their art for social change.

Culturally relevant activities should be structured so that youth feel comfortable to voice their experiences, struggles, and pride in their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and feel encouraged to continue to engage in traditions and expressive practices.

03. Centre the expertise of elders.

As knowledge keepers, Elders are an essential part of cultural continuity, as they pass down their wisdom and cultural knowledge, often through oral traditions.³ In culturally grounded programs, Elders lend their knowledge and influence to ensure credibility and authenticity, and must be continually engaged for guidance and direction.

In Native Spirit, the advisory board sought community leaders and local practitioners to lead each session.⁹ In KQts'iihtla, a committee of Elders and community representatives guided the Tłı̨ch̓ Community Action Research Team to ensure that the practices and norms of the Tłı̨ch̓ culture would be present and prioritized in the program design, development, implementation,

and evaluation.⁸ In the project that introduced the Wiradjuri language to schools, a community member recounted how Elders must not only be shown respect, but that Elders must have respect for a project in order to ensure its advancement.¹⁰

As knowledge keepers, Elders also inform those sharing knowledge on what is to be passed down through formal and informal lessons (e.g., school curricula, oral lessons); it is only with this mutual respect and approval that the cultural knowledge of Elders can be passed down to children and youth.¹⁰

Ongoing engagement with Elders has proven to be invaluable in programs that foster cultural identity to improve health and wellbeing. In the inner-city primary care clinic, patients reported feeling a stronger cultural identity and an increased sense of connection to their Indigenous heritage after meeting regularly with Elders.⁷ They also found comfort in engaging in ceremonies and in exploring other dimensions of their spirituality with Elders.⁷ The results from the Elders' Resilience Curriculum are similar: the improved sense of both self and community and the prolonged interaction with community Elders led to a decrease in suicides among youth.¹¹

04. Use culturally relevant research and evaluation methods.

Culturally relevant research methods and a thorough understanding of a community's values, practices, and beliefs are critical in developing culturally grounded programs; program interventions must begin here, rather than from dominant Eurocentric or Western theories and practices. This culturally relevant approach to programming has resulted in improved outcomes for youth.²

In Pathways, community members and academic researchers outlined considerations for co-operating respectfully, meaningfully, and efficiently in the implementation of programs; researchers were required to listen to the needs of the community while being aware of the community’s cultural identity.¹ The community partners were also asked to be appreciative of the evidence and data used to develop the program and to be willing and open towards the program.¹ In this way, understanding the impacts of culturally grounded programs results from researchers and community partners working together to integrate Indigenous culture and evidence.²

In addition to exploring traditional metrics, evaluations of culturally grounded programs should measure the program’s cultural relevance to participants. Native Spirit uses culturally valid evaluation measures, along with traditional evaluation measures, to ensure that post-program data is interpreted using a cultural lens.² These measures include community input, Elder review, and oral feedback and interviews.² Pathways took a similar approach to evaluation: the community partners collaborated in developing the evaluation measures, and survey questions were designed to assess the cultural components of the program.¹

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX’s online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: “Indigenous programming”, “culturally grounded”, and “youth programs”.

ENDNOTES

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10. Anderson, G. (2010). [Introducing Wiradjuri language in Parkes](#). In J. Hobson, K. Lowe, S. Poetsch, & M. Walsh (Eds.), *Re-awakening languages theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous languages* (pp. 72-76). Sydney University Press.
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