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## **Developing Culturally Responsive Youth Workers**

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**Abstract:** Culturally Responsive Youth Work: The Journey Matters is based on the theory that when knowledge and skills are found within the lived experiences and cultural contexts of youth, they are more meaningful and more engaging and are learned more easily (Gay, 2000). The program was evaluated using a retrospective pre-then-post test evaluation and showed significant increases in participants' awareness, knowledge, and skills. Interviews conducted 9 months after the training revealed that most had used the training material but cited the need for more ongoing support, tools, and resources. Recommendations are offered for building culturally responsive youth professionals.

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### **Introduction**

Out-of-school time programs serve communities that are growing in ethnic diversity. Currently, 20% of the children in the United States are first and second generation immigrant youth (Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003). The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) projects that by the year 2030, students of color will comprise 50% of children in K-12 public schools. This change in demographics will have implications for youth professionals, including the need to globalize the curriculum, restructuring activities to be culturally relevant to a broader audience, and investing resources in professional development in the area of intercultural development and communication (Johnson, 2009).

The field of youth development relies in large part on the skills of the youth professionals who are designing and delivering quality programs and opportunities for young people in out-of-school time settings (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). Staff performance of youth professionals is a key component in the success of youth programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In this article the term "youth professionals" refers to community out-of-school time program providers, youth program administrators and managers, and classroom teachers. The increasing number of youth of racial and ethnic diversity in the United States requires youth professionals to attain skills in building culturally responsive learning environments.

Research finds that the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential lenses (Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996). Professionals working with youth today must understand their own culture and its distinctive values, consider the different cultures and values of their youth participants and families, and examine how to meet the needs of each young person by acknowledging, respecting, and being inclusive of their culture and values (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002).

There is convincing evidence in the literature as to the need for cultural training for adults providing K-12 education and out-of-school time programs for young people. In order to develop culturally responsive programs, opportunities, and support for young people, the adults who facilitate such experiences need to be provided with the knowledge and skills to be culturally responsive to all the young people living in their communities (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). In 1995 a national survey of 547 county Extension agents in the Cooperative Extension System was conducted as part of an evaluation project supported by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund (Roehlkepartain, 1995). While youth development agents recognized the importance of reaching out to new audiences and that adjustments in their programming would need to be made, they lacked confidence in their ability to make the adjustments needed to attract and retain diverse youth to their programs. Of all agents surveyed, 96% agreed that they needed additional training and experience to understand diverse cultures and how to meet their basic youth needs in culturally responsive ways.

In addition, an assessment of training needs was conducted by the Youth Work Institute in the spring of 2003. The assessment was done by interviewing nearly 120 youth professionals in six regions of Minnesota. Knowledge of how to design and deliver culturally responsive programming was identified as one of their greatest training needs. They often referred to an increasingly diverse audience of youth moving into their communities and their lack of skills in how to adapt their programs to be culturally relevant to these new audiences of young people.

The Youth Work Institute at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development is committed to promoting youth development work by training youth professionals to intentionally create an environment that teaches and practices cultural responsiveness. Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural information, previous experiences, and learning styles of diverse students to make learning more relevant for them, acknowledging the unique cultural strengths of the youth participants. Extension educators developed a curriculum titled *Culturally Responsive Youth Work: The Journey Matters* in 2007-08 and conducted intensive evaluation of the pilot training. This article describes the training program, presents its evaluation, and offers recommendations for future training in this area.

## **Culturally Responsive Youth Work**

Bennett (1998) and Schaubert (2002), both scholars in the area of intercultural communication and interaction, discuss the importance of professionals acquiring an intercultural mindset and skill set. They make the case for individuals to recognize the cultural dimensions of themselves and of others they interact with while sustaining a positive, open mind towards differences. In addition they cite the need for skill development, using analysis of interaction frameworks to recognize possible areas of misunderstanding and develop skills in making appropriate adaptations during intercultural interactions.

This last skill set, making appropriate adaptations, is one of the most important competencies culturally responsive youth professionals need to attain. Adaptation is the process whereby one's worldview is expanded to include behaviors and values of another's culture. This does not just happen; rather it is a developmental process that has to begin with people becoming aware of their own cultural self (Bennett, 2007; Schaubert, 2002). Williams (2001) accurately describes the importance of self awareness in saying:

Cultural self awareness is the bridge to learning about other cultures. It is not possible to be truly sensitive to another culture until one is sensitive to their own and the impact that cultural customs, beliefs, values and behaviours have on youth development practice. A youth workers impression of a young person's behavioral style may be influenced by their own, sometimes unexamined assumptions. (p. 2)

When this important skill and other intercultural skill sets are realized, the professional is able to develop and implement culturally appropriate teaching methods which vary across cultures and meet the needs of the intended audiences (Schauber, 2002).

Culturally Responsive Youth Work: The Journey Matters is based on the theory that when knowledge and skills are found within the lived experiences and cultural contexts of youth, they are more meaningful and more engaging and are learned more easily and thoroughly (Gay, 2000). The curriculum integrates the principles of positive youth development and an understanding of the development of an intercultural mindset and skill set in creating a culturally responsive practice (Bennett, 1998; Schauber, 2002). By the end of the training participants are expected to:

1. Understand the meaning of subjective culture and becoming aware of one's own cultural self.
2. Raise awareness of the impact of privilege and oppression in their own lives and others.
3. Recognize the value of learning about the context and cultural differences of the young people youth professionals engage.
4. Identify and develop skills and resources for building intercultural relationships.
5. Assess current programming and create next steps for making youth/student programming more inclusive and empowering.
6. Make a personal commitment to ongoing development of intercultural sensitivity in order to create mutual adaptation strategies.

The lack of confidence and skills youth professionals have, paired with the changing demographics in communities, results in a significant number of young people being excluded by programming unless efforts are made to reach out to a more diverse population of youth with culturally responsive programs. In response to this issue, this training curriculum, Culturally Responsive Youth Work: The Journey Matters, was created and an intensive evaluation of the training was done to assess if youth professionals participating were reaching the intended program outcomes.

## **Training Design**

### **Participants**

Twenty-four people originally participated in the pilot program of Culturally Responsive Youth Work: The Journey Matters training. Twenty of the participants were female; four were male. Participants were youth

workers providing out-of-school time programs (14) and classroom teachers (10) from the metropolitan area in Minnesota. There was a diversity of job categories and tenure among participants.

## Curriculum Delivery

The pilot program was comprised of an 18-hour training over 6 days in February through March of 2008. The curriculum was delivered through a series of mini lectures addressing the research regarding culturally responsive skills and the implications for practice with youth audiences. These mini lectures were interspersed with interactive learning activities allowing participants to experience cultural simulations for reflection and discussion. In addition, the training provided opportunities for participants to practice application of learned skills in planning and developing their own culturally responsive practice. The six sessions were co-facilitated by two Extension educators with knowledge and training in youth development, culturally responsive youth work, and intercultural development.

## Evaluation Design

### Post-Training Evaluations

Participants completed an evaluation at the conclusion of each of the six sessions, and at the completion of the training, a retrospective pre-then-post test evaluation was administered to assess agreement with seven items utilizing a 5-point Likert scale. A retrospective pre-test was used based on recommendation in the literature, because the authors wanted practitioners to reflect on their perceived changes in cultural competence skills (Hill & Betz, 2005; Rockwell & Kohn, 1989). Survey items focused on measures of beliefs and attitudes, because these were viewed as necessary precursors to behavior change in the cultural competence literature. Participants also gave qualitative feedback on their experiences in the training, and many of these quotes have been utilized throughout the article to support our findings. These assessments provided information about short-term learning outcomes and will be further discussed.

### Interviews

Eight months after the training, participants were invited to participate in a follow-up phone interview in order to assess long-term learning outcomes. Phone interviews were conducted by an Extension educator who had no prior contact with the participants. Participants received two email reminders and then were contacted by phone. Four participants were unable to be located due to changes in employment. Of the remaining 20, 16 completed a phone interview. Interviews took less than 15 minutes and consisted of four questions designed to find out more about the impact of training and how materials were utilized. The four questions were:

- Have you utilized the material from the Cultural Responsive Youth Work training in your classroom/site? If so, how? If not, what has prohibited you?
- What impact (if any) has this training had in your practice?
- As part of the training, you developed a plan to implement at your site. Did you follow through with the plan? Explain.

- During the training, you identified a partner to support you and keep you accountable for implementing your plan. Has this been an effective strategy or what other methods could be better forms of support?

Interview manuscripts were analyzed for major themes by a researcher not connected to the delivery of the training. Responses were first coded by agreement or disagreement with the interview question and then were grouped by theme. Due to clarity of the data, reliability coding was not conducted. The goal of this follow up was to assess long-term learning outcomes and to specifically understand uses of the training information and any impact on personal and professional development and practice.

## Results

### Participants' Learning: Changes in Knowledge and Skills

After completing the 18-hour training, participants were asked to self report their changes in understanding of various culturally responsiveness concepts. Paired sample *t* tests revealed that participants had statistically significant differences in self-reported levels of awareness, knowledge, and skills when comparing before and after the training (Table 1). It was especially promising that participants identified positive growth in their awareness of cultural identity ( $M= .5, SD= .71$ ), knowledge that personal identity influences work ( $M= -1.11, SD= .9$ ), and intercultural skills that foster inclusion and empowerment ( $M= -.83, SD= .71$ ). These items clearly link to the goal of building a culturally responsive youth work field and suggest that participants perceive personal and professional changes with 18 hours of training.

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive Statistics & *t* Values from 18-Hour Final Evaluation

	Then		Now		<i>t</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Familiarity with the youth development framework.	2.44	1.30	4.17	.50	-6.20*
Awareness of my cultural identity.	3.83	.79	4.33	.49	-3.00*
Awareness of the cultural identities of the youth that I work with.	3.24	.83	4.06	.66	-5.34*
Knowledge that my personal identity influences my work.	3.50	.99	4.61	.61	-5.24*
Recognize the impact of power and privilege in youth development work.	3.00	1.09	4.44	.78	-5.33*
Possess intercultural skills that foster inclusion and empowerment of all youth.	3.28	1.02	4.11	.68	-5.00*
Have a defined plan for improving inclusion and empowerment in youth programming.	2.39	.85	4.17	.62	-9.33*
N= 18, * $p < .05$ , scale from 1 (Not at All) to 5 (Very Much)					

## Participants' Use of New Knowledge and Skills

In the post-interview, 81% of participants reported that they had used material from the training. Three major purposes of use emerged from the data: directly with youth (50%), for training of direct service staff (25%), and for personal development (25%). Participants were most likely to use the information directly with youth through the use of a supplemental activity CD that was provided at the end of training. One participant shared at the end of the training, "Be sure to include as many activities and lessons as possibleâ teachers love new lesson plans they don't have to figure out all by themselves."

Reliance on supplemental materials was not the intention of the training. Rather, the training sought to develop cultural awareness and intercultural skills and increased intercultural sensitivity based upon research that suggests that one must first have an understanding of their own cultural self before building an understanding of other's cultural identities (Bennett, 1998, 2007; Schauber, 2002). It will be important in future efforts to balance the necessary goals for building a more culturally responsive workforce with activity-based lessons that youth professionals can implement in their daily practice.

When asked to reflect on the impact of the training on their practice, participants again were more likely to discuss ways that the curriculum led to specific changes in working directly with youth (11 of 16, or 69%). One participant reflected, "As I work with youth I really appreciate the opportunity to gain tools/resources that help me build relationships with them." Another noted, "I've always been aware that I could/should do more in my room to get kids thinking about stereotypes, empathy, diversity, etc. I feel more equipped and enabled to do just that."

Professionals working in the field are clearly concerned with gaining knowledge and experience that can directly benefit their practice with youth. Again, while building skills to work with youth is an important goal, it was the hope of the facilitators that participants would reflect on growing in their awareness of their own cultural identities. Some participants did recognize the influence the training had on the way they thought about themselves or their work with youth (7 of 16, or 44%). One participant articulated this point at the end of the training in saying: "Providing an optimistic mentality toward doing this work with youth goes a long way toward changes actually being made."

A final component of the training was the development of an action plan to put the information into practice and the identification of a partner to keep youth professionals accountable. The plan prompted participants to make goals for both personal and professional changes. Interview data revealed that 56% were unaware of their plan, and only two participants had made major gains on their plan. This is despite the enthusiasm that they shared in creating the document at the time of training. One participant stated, "With development of the action plan I have a place to start getting to know my students on a more intimate/personal level." Another reflected, "I will continue to set goals and take steps to accomplish these goals. I will strive to always do more, to have this always at the forefront of my thoughts and plans." Future efforts should evaluate more effective ways of engaging participants in creating change in their practice.

In addition, many participants (75%) had no fruitful contact with their designated partner. The four who utilized this strategy (25%) had a friend or co-worker as a partner. Future efforts should emphasize assigning partners who are in contact on a more frequent basis. Participants also suggested that the Youth Work Institute facilitate online support such as blogs, webinars, newsletters, and emails to give added support. The use of technology to keep people connected seemed to be a common suggestion; however, value was still placed on maintaining communication through face-to-face contact with informal gatherings of youth professionals to explore and further discuss cultural responsive practices.

## Recommendations

As stated earlier, one of the most important competencies culturally responsive youth professionals need to learn is mutual cultural adaptation. The main intent of the curriculum was to increase the participants' cultural self awareness so that they could begin to create mutually adaptive, culturally responsive environments for youth. The post interviews revealed that participants were more concerned about acquiring tools and ideas from the training to use directly with youth than they were about increasing awareness of their cultural self. Only one person commented on her personal development towards becoming more culturally responsive and reflected that she utilized the material internally to keep herself more aware of her outlook and to remain cognizant of bias. The curriculum and the facilitators need to be explicit that this type of cultural responsiveness training is intended for the development of the youth workers directly and for the young people they work with indirectly. Recommendations for building culturally responsive youth professionals in the future include:

- In the beginning of the training session, stress the importance of the discovery of individual, cultural self-awareness.
- Offer ongoing support to participants via webinars, a facilitated blog site, monthly or quarterly email updates, or newsletters. Many suggested this in the post interview as a better alternative than getting support from a partner.
- Offer tangible tools to participants that can be used in every day practice to assist in building a culturally responsive environment for diverse youth. When participants were asked if they had used the training material since we met, most responded that they used the CD of youth activities and really appreciated the tool; however, tools should be specific in their purpose of changing practice to create culturally responsive learning and interaction for participants.
- Structure the sessions so that there is more time for self reflection and more time for small and large group reflection and discussion. Many of the end-of-session evaluations requested more time for discussion and reflection.
- Blend a mix of face-to-face training, off site assignments, online support, and training to provide the amount of training hours needed to make real impact. Bennett (2009) contends that it takes approximately 30 hours of training to move an individual from one stage of development to another.
- Focus the training on the essential intercultural skills of recognizing one's own culture and the cultural differences of others, expanding one's inventory of adaptive behavior and valuing cultural difference in the audiences we serve (Bennett, 2007).

The investment of time and resources into building a more culturally responsive youth work field will make the experiences we provide for young people more meaningful, engaging and increasingly beneficial to their overall development.

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