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Reinventing a Cultural Self: Textile Design and Native American Youth
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Abstract. This paper presents a description of a textile based program for Native American youth and an investigation that resulted from a community-university collaborative effort. This paper can help inform practice, academic, and policy related professionals who are interested in developing, implementing, or evaluating youth programming and culturally-based programs. The purpose of the project was threefold: 1) to involve youth from the Indian Center, Inc. of Lincoln in the design and creation of an art project, which was installed at the Daywatch facility in Lincoln, Nebraska, 2) to examine how the cultural knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, and identity of youth from the Indian Center were influenced by their participation in this project, and 3) to identify strengths and weaknesses of the youth program that would be used to inform future decisions about programming. This paper will focus on the first objective while providing a summary of the investigation.

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of an art project and research study that was conducted by an interdisciplinary collaborative community-university team (see Simon & Lerner, 1998, for review of university-community collaborative models) of faculty, services providers, community volunteers, and university students with adolescent youth from the Indian Center. The advantages of working collaboratively and the implications of the research findings are highlighted to assist others in developing and implementing culturally based youth programs (see Locke, 1992 for model of multicultural understanding).

Summary of Project and Research

The art project and research study became a reality through efforts of a variety of community members and a university member who had a history of collaboration to provide service to members of the community. The faculty member from the Textiles, Clothing, and Design department invited a member of the department of Family and Consumer Sciences with an interest in youth development (see Lerner and Spanier, 1980 for review on adolescent development) to become part of the collaborative team. Through discussions between the faculty, the coordinator of a youth program at the Indian Center, and the director at a community facility for the homeless population the art project and research were developed and implemented. Community volunteers, Native American youth, homeless or near-homeless clients from the Daywatch facility and service providers at Daywatch also participated in the art project.

The purpose of this art project was to provide a creative textile design program for a group of 11 at-risk youth, ranging in age from 12-18 years old. Youth from the Indian Center, Inc. of Lincoln were involved in the design and creation of a sound absorbing wall of pillows connected in a grid to be installed at the Daywatch facility in Lincoln. The research component, an ethnographic research study (see Schensul & LeCompte, 1999, for review of ethnography), was added to assess the youth program and the creative

project to identify areas where changes could be made for a more effective youth program and project. The project and study were modified, which is appropriate in ethnography when the information, observations, and interactions inform and necessitate the changes. The primary change was to focus on the youth instead of the initial goal to study the interactions between youth and the clients at Daywatch, the homeless shelter.

Methodology

Art Project. In Spring 1999, the youth designed a project for a daytime facility for homeless and near homeless adults. Modeled on previous work (see Figure 1) with a visiting Polish artist, Maria Tyniec, this project, facilitated by the faculty member in Textiles, Clothing, and Design, used the format of printing on pillows hooked together to create a sound absorbing wall hanging for a high traffic space. The project was structured so the young people could learn how to interview vulnerable adults to find out what subject matter was important to clients of diverse backgrounds, could learn creative thinking and art skills, and could become more knowledgeable about culture and diversity, with a focus on their culture. The youth met at the Indian Center for preliminary discussions, role-playing activities (see Figure 2), and research interviews followed by design activities at the university. The facilitators provided snacks during an informal group reflection period.



Figure 1. Pillows Talk, Project with Maria Tyniec
Photo: Wendy Weiss



Figure 2. Role playing at the Indian Center
Photo: Wendy Weiss

Research Study. A faculty member in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, who is also a licensed marriage and family therapist, conducted this ethnographic study which was approved by the governing institutional review board for research with human subjects. An overview of the research design and results that are relevant to developing culturally competent youth programs are reported. The suggestions provided are based on quantitative and qualitative data collected from the youth in their natural settings (i.e., observations at Indian Center, university, and homeless shelter). The youth completed survey questionnaires, with open and closed ended questions, at the start and end of the project that focused on racial and cultural identity, multicultural knowledge and contact, expectations of the project, their experience in the project, and the skills they developed. Youths also participated in a post

face-to-face 30-60 minute interview that gave them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences in the art project and youth group in more depth. In addition, the researcher documented the activity in the 16 sessions, the interactions between the facilitators and participants, and the process that developed as a result of the ongoing interactions between all of the participants of the project (facilitators, volunteers, students, and Daywatch clients).

Results

Quantitative Study

Sample and Cultural Identity. Eleven Native American youth participated in the art project and ten participated in the research component of the project. Of the ten youth, there were seven females and three males who ranged in age from 12 to 18 (M=15). All of the youth identified as being Indian/Native American when they were responding to a question that listed racial and ethnic groups. However, in an open-ended question, the responses were more variable (Native American, 4; American Indian, 3; Urban Indian, 2, and American Native, 1) and fit under more than one category (e.g., racial, cultural, and ethnic identity). All of the youth identified as being from multiple racial, cultural, or ethnic groups. (i.e., White, Native American, Omaha, Mexican/Chicano, Native American, half-breed, American Indian, Urban Indian– Sioux, Lakota). One youth denied being a member of a racial group even though the youth did identify as Native American.

Experiences with other cultures. Prior to the art project, eighty percent of the youth had little to no contact with people who were homeless. However, forty percent stated they were very comfortable with the idea of being around people who were homeless. Their contact with the five major racial/ethnic groups was high with the exception of the Asian Americans (20%) and to a lesser degree, Hispanics (see Table 1).

Table 1. Experiences with Racial/Cultural Groups

	African American	American Indians	Asian Americans	Hispanics	Whites
A lot of contact	80	100	20	70	90
A lot of knowledge	30	80	10	40	70
Very much in circle of friends	90	100	40	60	80
Provided most services in community	50	80	30	50	80
Feel very comfortable with	70	100	50	60	60
Feel very understood by	80	100	20	50	40
Would accept help from	80	100	70	70	100
Very respectful of Native American culture	90	90	30	60	10

Note: Percentages of youths are based on 100% for each item by cultural group.

Comfort Level, Friendship, Understanding and Respect. As the chart indicates, all of the youth reported high levels of comfort with people of their own culture. Given the high percentage of youth who have a lot of contact and friendships with people from the

White culture, it is surprising to consider the low percentage of youth who felt very understood (40%) and highly respected (10%) by people from this group. In addition, few youth had friendships or only somewhat of a friendship with Asian Americans (10% and 40%, respectively) and Hispanics (20% and 10%, respectively).

Cultural Identity Issues Before and After the Art Project. All of the youth identified cultural identity as important to them and to others. More specifically, eighty percent of the youth strongly agreed cultural identity was important to them while only 20% strongly agreed that it was important to others. All of the youth perceived that the project would recognize their cultural values and help them increase their awareness and appreciation of their own and other cultures. Only one youth did not believe the art project would expose him/her to new cultural perspectives and another youth did not expect that the project would increase understanding of other cultures.

After the completion of the art project, half of the youth reported that the art project recognized their cultural values (50%), while one-fifth of the youth increased their awareness of their culture (20%). The majority of the youth indicated they were exposed to new perspectives with the homeless (90%), Hispanics (90%), Whites (80%), and Native American (70%). The percentage of youth exposed to new perspectives on African Americans (30%) and Asian Americans (10%) dropped, possibly as a result of the low participation of these groups in the sample of homeless clients.

Building Creative Skills. The majority of youth had a positive experience as members of the art project. Sixty percent of the youths reported that they experienced with new methods, materials, and techniques (see Figure 3). Half of the youth indicated that they had expanded how they thought about making artwork. Overall, most of the youth believed their interactions with the workshop instructor exposed them to new perspectives (70%), expanded their approach to drawing (90%) and screen printing (80%), built their confidence to be creative (80%), and prepared them to work on their own (80%). Only half of the youth considered their interactions with other youth to be related to their higher level of creative confidence.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Below is a listing of issues that were relevant to more than half of the youth as revealed throughout the project and observations:

- surprise at being given the responsibility to be "real artists."
- experienced feelings of respect from multiple sources, in response to artwork.
- expressed a greater understanding of themselves, but more importantly, found it easier to communicate this to other people.
- felt they gained a clearer understanding of the meaning and power of imagery and storytelling in their culture.
- felt the importance and power of being part of a larger community when they visualized the final artwork at Daywatch.
- reported feeling sensitized to the humanness (e.g., similarities and differences between them and others) of homeless or near-homeless people.

- understood the importance of facilitators' flexibility, and creativity in conveying instructions (e.g., gesture drawing, role playing, role modeling)
- learned culturally responsive communication styles that were consistent with Daywatch clients.

In response to specific questions in the interviews, youth reported the following.

Motivation for Participation in Project. The stipend that youth received was the least significant motivator for them although they each commented that it would be helpful to have this money. Their motivation was more frequently related to the desire to connect with the other youth in the program, with giving back to those less fortunate than themselves, and being with adults who "respected" them.

Youths' Perceptions of Interactions with Daywatch Clients. When the youth were asked about their experience with the Daywatch clients, the males and females responded differently, indicating gender differences in their perception of experiences. The males were observed to consistently be less interactive during the Daywatch visits with clients and staff. The majority of the female youth were observed to be increasingly interactive with clients and staff at the center. The females reported that the importance of helping people less fortunate, connectedness, and carrying out traditions of their culture was brought to life through this project. The youth reported feeling proud of their heritage even though they did not have as much knowledge as they believed they should have.

The developmental process of engaging in relationships was evident to the youth. The youth described increasing comfort each time they visited the Daywatch facility. They believe sharing their "Indian tacos" was a way to reach out to people and a way to share the importance of culture. Half of the students commented on the importance of food in their culture ("having a meal with somebody will make it easier to start friendships," male participant; and "anytime you want people to feel cared about, you make them something to eat in our culture" female participant). A final perception of their experience was that adults provided them with a high level of autonomy, especially at Daywatch. Ten of the eleven youth agreed that this was difficult at first, but they saw it as helpful in getting comfortable with the clients and the process. Two youth agreed that it showed that the adults respected and trusted them.

The Function of Food to the Project. Food and sharing meals provided an opportunity for relationships to develop between the youth and adults, for youth to talk about their experiences that day, and for the adults to listen to the youths' needs and experiences. Food played an important role in building relationships, making connections both within the youth group, the art project, and the work with the Daywatch clients. Information could be gathered in this context that was not likely to be shared in a one-to-one interaction or by direct questioning. Through these naturally-occurring conversations, it became apparent that youth were aware of and interested in health issues that were related to their Native American culture as well as the dominant culture ("Most of the families I know that are Native American, including my own, don't eat healthy at all – there's a lot of fat in our food"). This may illustrate the lack of information on how the Native American community has been impacted by the dominant culture and their history. In addition, it indicated that the majority of youth had a desire to be more health conscious.

The Importance of Power and Control to Youth Development. Youth reports and observational data illustrated a need to include teaching and learning experiences that would help some of the youth develop skills that are critical to taking on expanded roles and participating more fully in the decision-making process. Eight of the eleven youth commented positively on the adults' willingness or decision to "let us make decisions and do things on our own as much as we did," however, the program did not provide the learning experiences necessary for the less confident and inexperienced of the group. About half of the youth had less voice. One youth commented "Every time I tried to be a leader, I was shut down – I don't know what I'm doing wrong but they don't want me to be a leader." Another youth stated, "I don't know – I just don't know what I'm suppose to do - I can't decide what I like best." The youth selected their roles each time a visit was planned to go to Daywatch. Those who were less extroverted or confident in developing new relationships took roles that required fewer interactions with clients. The youths with the broader range of interpersonal skills and higher levels of self-confidence with new people and situations took the responsibility of building the bridges with the Daywatch clients and staff. A consistent strategy to respond to the different developmental needs of this group of youth is necessary.

Examples of the youths' creativity, use of power, and decision-making was evident throughout the project. One idea was to create a handout in Spanish to increase the opportunity for Spanish-speaking clients at Daywatch to participate. Later, one of the youth suggested that clients be invited to provide their handprint on a pillow. This suggestion was followed by another youth that said food (Indian tacos) be provided to the Daywatch clients. The youth set up a rainbow of textile paint colors and square pieces of material for clients to place their handprints on to create a variety of designs. Daywatch client feedback on the initial set of designs (see Figure 4) was considered "too cute." They reported that the designs lacked meaning or a message consistent with the Daywatch facility. Youth came up with culturally appropriate ideas including quotes, "Jesus te ama" and "Virgin de Guadalupe" which were inspirational to the Spanish-speaking clients at Daywatch.



Figure 3. Design Work by Youth.
Photo: Wendy Weiss

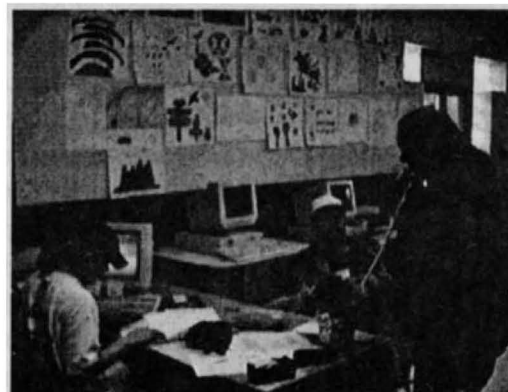


Figure 4. Presentation of initial design
at Daywatch. Photo: Wendy Weiss.

It became apparent that critical time and discussion were needed to help many of the youth develop skills necessary to engage in decision-making to develop appropriate

designs for the approximately 32 pillows needed. At this stage, the Daywatch clients' ideas and the youth's interpretation of the ideas were still separate. About half of the youth were experiencing frustration at this point as evidenced by silence, comments ("I don't know" heard repeatedly by many of the youth; "I can't do it,"), and behavior (physical and emotional distancing and withdrawal from group process). Youth were struggling with how to make decisions ("how do we decide when some liked a design and some didn't?"; "How are we supposed to figure out what they want?"). This was an opportunity for learning group processes and decision-making. Although the youth were supported and encouraged to engage in this type of critical thinking, it became apparent that their ability to make these decisions was limited. They did not have the skills necessary to engage fully in this decision making process, or the context did not allow these skills to be expressed. Guidance and direction from the adults allowed the youth to ultimately integrate client and staff feedback into the revised designs.

This part of the project was one illustration of the need to include a teaching and learning process into the artistic component of the program that attends to the cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial development of youth, in this case, Native American youth. This can assist in increasing an understanding of the similarities and uniqueness of the developmental and learning needs of the youth and how programs can be developed that will respond to these issues. The result would be to make an artistic activity an opportunity to teach the youth concepts that are relevant to life skills and would build their strengths while simultaneously having fun and being creative.

Artwork and the Learning Experience. During the process of selecting the type of designs identified by clients, 4 themes emerged: images of nature, religion, values of children, and hope. The decision was made to not use any religious themes since the number of panels would not provide the space to represent the diversity of beliefs or religions held by clients at Daywatch.

Once the designs were completed, the youth learned how to screen-print. When imagery required complex drawing or letters, they used a light safe pen or contact paper to create their designs and lettering. It was more difficult to engage the males in this part of the project. All the males reported being tired and one youth was slept for a short time during one of these sessions. During other sessions, the males and two of the females needed more encouragement and direction to remain on task. Even with encouragement and support, a pattern of withdrawal and resistance to participating in this particular activity became most evident with the males. On a couple of occasions, the males engaged in varying degrees of inappropriate behaviors that led to adults being more directive and on one occasion, a youth being taken home. These observations necessitate that future programming consider processes and structures that allow youth to engage in self-reflection and dialogue about their own reactions to challenging situations.

The youngest member of the group facilitated the final selections for the artwork. She became the most vocal about which selections to use when the other youths were struggling with how to engage in this group decision-making. Over half of the youth made comments or reported that they did not want to choose because they didn't want to hurt people's feelings. A decision was made to keep the following: image of African American girl, outstretched hand, butterflies, big fish, jagged mountain scene, flowers, sun design. Once the designs were selected, the youth chose the design they wanted to

create. This discussion and decision-making process was challenging for the youth and required them to engage in thoughtful discussion and reflection about what their clients were asking for. They needed to envision the completed designs that would be joined to create the final wall hanging. After this process, the youth became quiet and they were unable to focus. Each time this occurred, the facilitators knew it was time for a break and some food. During this day, pizza was on the menu. The group again was quiet and engaged minimally in any interactions. There appeared to be a sense of contentment in the room and the genders sat separately.

Challenging Moments in the Project. Three incidents of high conflict occurred with the youth. Twice between two youths and once when a youth was found lying to youth director (one of the facilitators) about his need to go home early from the activity. These types of incidents must be expected when youth participate in groups and activities. Adolescents vary in their skills to communicate, negotiate, and engage in decision-making processes. The three adult leaders never clearly articulated a guideline for who was ultimately responsible for addressing psychosocial and socio-emotional needs of the youth. There were no structured plans, roles, or responses to address the needs of the youths in these tense situations. The director of the youth program was the identified person given her relationship with the youth, however, she was not always attentive to these needs.

The director had to talk with the male youths several times about their behavior, their lack of consistent involvement in the activities. A few times one of the facilitators had to remind the youth they needed to work in order to earn the money. This was primarily directed to the male youth who were challenged at times with focusing their attention on the tasks involved. The building level of frustration was met with two responses. If redirection did not work, the director talked with them individually, and in one instance, one youth was taken home after he was noncompliant. The youth director verbalized a need to keep the males following the rules. At times, the authority role and the structure of the program appeared to minimize staff's ability to take on the supporting role.

A third solution evolved given the problems the males were having. The male artist worked with the male youth during the next session at the Indian Center to work on the artwork. Three females made a trip to a local tent and awning shop with the female artist to use a special machine to install grommets. These supportive roles provided more interaction and guidance for youth. Although the males were overtly needing support in psycho-social and emotional development, females were observed and reported a need to have someone to help them when they're struggling with self- and other- issues. The youth were unable to come to any conclusions about what kind of help they needed or wanted. Examples include youths' statements, "I know I get quiet but when I get mad that's what I do" and "I know I'm a real problem sometimes but when I'm angry I can't stop myself." *Responding to Youth Issues.* After a particularly difficult session, the adults met to discuss the situation. The youth director provided background to enhance understanding of the dynamics occurring between the youth. The researcher completed a genogram (see McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985), which are designed to provide a visual representation of families. It also provides a visual image of relationships among and between members of a family. The genogram made evident the youths' membership in

overlapping family systems. There were large families, inter-racial marriages, extended family systems within households, multiple divorces, and familial relationships between the youth. Two of the youth were cousins, two were sisters, two were half brothers, and two were half sisters. Although this is not an inclusive listing, family issues included a chronic illness, problem drinking and alcoholism, a history of criminal activity by adults and youth, homelessness, and sexual acting out. These family structures and dynamics create a context for youth that can make it more challenging to their psychosocial and educational development. Individual challenges for youth included a learning disability, fetal alcohol effects, and school behavior, involvement, and academic problems. This helped to explain why transitions from one activity to another were difficult for some of the youth. This necessitates that an environment, structure, and process be created that respond to the special needs of youth that are challenged by these factors.

One of the youth programmers, a college student, described the importance of returning to the Indian world. This is supported by the enculturation hypothesis that indicates that individuals who know and identify with their traditional ethnic culture will have a greater sense of psychological well-being and fewer problem behaviors (see Zimmerman et al., 1995 for review). She reported that she would go into the college world where she maintained a peer group that was typically not from her culture. She would return to the Indian world after each trip to the outer world where she would find the resources necessary to make that trip back out to the college world where she experienced herself as more separate. She perceived that the youth also had similar experiences and she had seen them come in to the youth group with a sense of relief, returning to their Indian world. The community artist was successful at developing relationships with youth and motivating them to connect with their artistic self. He engaged with them in a collegial manner that the youth identified as "he was just a friend-like." His non-threatening role allowed relationships to develop naturally without a high level of expectations being experienced by the youth. They perceived the community artist as "supportive" and "great to be around."

The university artist took on the role of project coordinator, which was challenging given the broad range of participants and the planning that was entailed in making this a successful project. Duties included keeping the project moving forward, planning, selecting and providing work materials, linking the various organizations participating in this joint project, and taking responsibility for meeting deadlines. The feedback from the youth was positive and focused on the concrete things they learned from the university artist. The youth were overt in their feelings about her talent. As a female youth summarized, "she's very different from people I know – she's so good at her art and putting things together and she really wants to help us learn how to put those art things together-that is so great."

Implications

This study illustrates the importance of collaborative community-university models to the effective development and implementation of youth groups. Collaboration is most effective when the relationships are developed over time. These relationships are essential for the kind of frank discussion that is necessary to address the complex needs of the youth. Flexibility is required to maintain an effective program that balances the

individual and group needs of youth and adults so people can maintain a balance of autonomy and interdependence. Without attention to these areas, individuals and the group are at risk of stress-related burn out.

Youth groups designed for people of color must be recognized as valuable to the development of youth. Culturally based youth groups provide a shelter from the outside world where the youth can interact in a context that is supportive of their self-identity and development. Recognizing and valuing youths' multiple cultures, diverse backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles requires that structures, strategies, and processes be incorporated into the youth program that are consistent with these goals. Programming staff, including non-professionals in other areas, must continually be in a state of "becoming" cognizant of the various developmental and cultural needs of adolescents and when and how to most effectively involve families. Youth programs can be designed and scheduled so older adolescents can continue to be involved. The involvement of older youth would enhance the program for the younger youth and role model the importance of staying involved in the group. Youth groups that can support the development of group cohesiveness will provide a sense of connectedness and security for participants.

In summary, youth groups for people of color have a place in community programming and scholarly activities. Through the continued work of people in the community and in academia, studies must continue to be developed and implemented that will provide a stronger base of knowledge that can be used to inform policy and programming decisions. This will encourage a move toward an increase in resources to address the needs of youth of color, given the challenges of unique cultural issues and stressors that these youth may experience (e.g., discrimination, acculturative stress, oppressive forces, historical challenges, high rate of school drop out) (Berry, 1994).

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