



Research Snapshot

Evaluating culturally-relevant programs for Indigenous youth: Challenges and strategies

What is this research about?

This research identifies the challenges in evaluating the Fourth R Uniting Our Nations programming for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) youth. In general there has been a move towards evidence-based practice and the need for increasingly rigorous research designs. The researchers identified the tensions between these rigid research guidelines and the required relationship-based partnerships with the program partners, including FNMI youth, community members, and educators. Uniting Our Nations is a culturally-relevant program for FNMI youth that emphasizes skill development and healthy relationships. The program is delivered within a culturally-sensitive and strengths-based framework and incorporates the knowledge of Elders and other community members as contributors to FNMI education.

“Community-based research partnerships have emerged as a new model for achieving an equitable, respectful approach to research that honours the autonomy of the FNMI community and leads to clear benefits for Indigenous people.”

What did the researchers do?

The researchers identified pressures faced to conduct stringent research, as illustrated by the conditions for establishing rigor put forth by the American Psychological Association (APA). The researchers identified areas of poor fit between this model and the cultural and logistical realities of evaluating the Uniting Our Nations program.



What you need to know:

A balance must be found between a strict research design and honoring the requirements of a community-based partnership when evaluating programming for First Nations youth. The researchers found that community-based research partnerships are essential to engage FNMI youth and partners in the evaluation culturally-relevant programming.

Some of the APA guidelines include the use of randomization, a comparison group, and a large sample size, all of which were difficult to produce for the small group of FNMI youth in the study. Additional challenges in satisfying the APA requirements included defining the specific problem, finding validated measures, and using treatment manuals. Instead of identifying a specific problem to be addressed, the researchers adhered to a strengths-based perspective and reframed the overarching program goal to build skills in the FNMI youth. Furthermore, these challenges exist within a context of the historical practices of research that resulted in the exploitation and maltreatment of FNMI peoples, contributing to a mistrust of governing agencies.

Researchers are encouraged to:

- ensure the research is relevant to the needs of the community
- demonstrate respect for community codes of practice and cultural protocols
- take a strengths-based approach

What did the researchers find?

Through their experience with the Uniting Our Nations youth program, the researchers identified eight success factors in seeking a balance between research requirements and community-based research partnerships:

- **Recognizing and engaging complex authority structures.** Evaluators must respect the codes and customs of FNMI people. Often authority for granting research approval does not sit with one individual in a community.
- **Recognizing the importance of the Elder engagement process.** Evaluators should become informed of the practices unique to each community.
- **Emphasizing cultural competence in the partnership process.** Evaluators must be able to communicate with an understanding of the FNMI worldview and be able to balance the competing research priorities.
- **Working from the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2nd ed).** This document outlines requirements for research with FNMI people, and prioritizes respectful relationships.
- **Utilizing a strengths-based approach.** Recognizing that many challenges for FNMI people have stemmed from colonialization, evaluations should emphasize positive mental health and well-being.
- **Educating research assistants.** All researchers on the project should be trained to work from a culturally sensitive framework.
- **Planning for longer timeframes.** Compatible with the FNMI worldview, consideration should be given to the pace and deadlines of the project.
- **Developing appropriate measures.** Effort should be placed in creating assessment measures that are reflective of the FNMI peoples and experiences.

How can you use this research?

Researchers must recognize FNMI codes and customs and honour community-based research partnerships as foundational in appropriately evaluating FNMI youth programming. At the same time, there is external pressure for building the evidence base about what works for whom, so navigation between rigor and community-based research partnerships requires an ongoing balance.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Crooks, C. V., Snowshoe, A., Chiodo, D., & Brunette-Debassige, C. (2013). Navigating between rigour and community-based research partnerships: Building the evaluation of the Uniting Our Nations health promotion program for FNMI youth. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, 32, 13-25.

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