

# Designing Culturally Responsive Organized After-School Activities

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In the past six months or so, I've noticed the term 'cultural responsiveness' coming up more and more around the office. I hear it in meetings across a broad range of topics from social-emotional learning strategies to pilot projects in informal STEM education. As we work to incorporate cultural responsiveness into our own work and examine its impact, a review of the literature for best practices shows we aren't the only ones thinking about this.

The January 2017 issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Research* is entirely devoted to this topic via their special issue: *How culture matters in afterschool programs for adolescents*. While all of the articles are definitely worth a read, the article [\*Designing Culturally Responsive Organized After-School Activities\*](#) by Sandra Simpkins and colleagues stands out as being especially relevant to our work.

Simpkins and colleagues begin by acknowledging the myriad research on practices to support positive youth development in out-of-school time (OST). However, our society is growing evermore culturally diverse, and to date, little research has yet to explore the impact of culture on those practices. The National Research Council has identified eight research-based features of high-quality programs. In their paper, Simpkins and colleagues take these eight features and share with the reader how culturally responsive practices can be integrated within each of them.

1. ***Physical and psychological safety***

Just because an environment feels safe for some, does not mean it feels safe to all. Promoting positive intergroup relations is as critical as addressing/preventing biases via open conversations with both students and families.

2. ***Appropriate structure***

Programs often focus on developmentally appropriate activities, rules, etc -- but cultural appropriateness is equally important. For example, there are cultural differences in frequency of directives and amount of oversight youth receive from adults at home. Therefore, some adolescents may expect or prefer a certain type of structure while it may not resonate well with others. Knowing your audience is important.

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### Abstract

Organized after-school activities promote positive youth development across a range of outcomes. To be most effective, organized activities need to meet high-quality standards. The eight features of quality developed by the National Research Council's Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth have helped guide the field in this regard. However, these standards have largely been defined in terms of universal developmental needs, and do not adequately speak to the growing ethnic and racial diversity within the United States, which is further complicated by issues of power and social class differences. Given U.S. population shifts and after-school funding priorities, the time has come to consider new ways to provide organized after-school activities that are responsive to youth's culture and everyday lives. The goal of this article is to explore how we can help ensure that after-school activities are culturally responsive and address the specific needs of the youth who participate in these activities. Based on theory and empirical evidence, we provide proposed practices of cultural responsiveness for each of the eight features of quality for program structure and staff. The article

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#### 4. *Supportive relationships*

The field of OST is known for its emphasis on positive youth-staff relationships. This area is a prime setting for embedding cultural responsiveness as these staff can serve as “cultural brokers,” helping to ensure that a student’s culture is recognized. Research in more formal settings has already documented the positive impact of same race/ethnicity student-teacher pairings.

#### 5. *Opportunities to belong*

Youth voice has long been touted as a critical component to effective OST, especially among older youth. Programs that provide youth with opportunities to make choices in line with their own backgrounds, norms, viewpoints, etc. will inherently foster cultural responsiveness.

#### 6. *Positive social norms*

Setting universal social norms that govern how students should interact with one another in the OST space can be a challenge among a diverse group. The researchers state that: *Although many cultures uphold similar moral values, there is often variability in individuals’ expectations, habits and ways of doing things.* As with other areas, they highlight the value of seeking input from both students as well as families. Further, they highlight the importance of ensuring that the norms themselves focus on equality and inclusion.

#### 7. *Support for efficacy and mattering*

OST recognizes the importance of relevance in student learning, often including it in formal assessments of program quality. However, relevance is relative. Staff should work

to ensure that all students can make real-world connections to the activities they participate in, regardless of their cultural background.

8. *Opportunities for skill building*

While this topic is often thought of as referring to reading, math, physical skills, etc., staff are encouraged to extend this to cultural understanding -- looking for teachable moments to discuss the role of culture and ways in which cultural differences may be bridged in certain situations. Further, when selecting skill-building activities, it is important to keep in mind that there may be cultural differences in valued skills.

9. *Integration of family, school and community efforts*

OST programs traditionally struggle with parent/community involvement. As the value of cultural responsiveness gains greater attention, the need to identify best practices to ensure parent/community engagement becomes even stronger.

While these lessons can apply to all aspects of students' lives, both in- and out-of-school, expanded learning has been, and continues to be, an ideal setting for culturally responsive pedagogy. How do you incorporate cultural responsiveness in your practices? Tell us in comments.