The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation

Culturally Responsive Evaluation

Culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) is an evaluation approach that places culture and the community of focus at the center of the evaluation, helps to support community empowerment, and has a goal of social justice. This entry explains the reasons for the development of CRE, describes its components, details the process used to conduct CRE and how it contributes to social change, and gives an example of CRE in practice.

Historically, culture has been viewed as "noise" in evaluation—a confounding variable and a subjective factor to be controlled for or discounted. Similarly, the context of an evaluand was considered but treated as separate or distinct. Often, evaluators and program developers indicated that a program was supposed to have the same results regardless of culture and context.

The development of policies and programs has been dominated by people who are not part of the culture and context where those programs have their impact and this disregard and/or ignorance has contributed to perpetuating injustices. Programs have been eliminated because evaluators did not perceive the need for them or were looking at outcomes that were not relevant for the group benefiting from the program. In other cases, context was not considered in decision making around allocation of resources. Some continue to receive programs that may respond to surface needs but fail to solve underlying problems.

CRE has contributed to the field's recognition of the profound influence of culture and context on the evaluand and its intended beneficiaries. It not only considers context but also uses it as data to understand the evaluand and the participants and a compass to direct the program in ways that lead to justice for that community. Cultural context also provides a way to understand the evaluand that reveals how participants experience it and why. It then builds the understanding necessary to identify what justice would mean to and for that community.

CRE Components

There are four main components to CRE: (1) culture, (2) context, (3) responsiveness, and (4) a commitment to social justice.

Culture

Culture is the shared norms and underlying belief system of a group as manifested and guided by its values, rituals, practices, language, institutions, and artifacts. Culture creates and identifies meaning, delineates values and guides how they are turned into action, and shapes the practices and behaviors of a group. For example, one group may value individualism and another collectivism. These values may be applied through individualistic learning rituals or group-oriented education practices.

Culture influences our perception and, thus, how we perform. It also affects what we view as the perceived totality of options for our behavior. A person who values collectivism may benefit and do quite well in a group-oriented and community- focused program and a person who believes intelligence is inherent may see the first sign of difficulty in answering a challenging question in school as a lack of intelligence and, consequently, quit. Therefore, the program strategy may need to change depending on the cultural belief system. The evaluator must consider these dynamics to assist in achieving programmatic goals.

To help ensure cultural sensitivity, the community or beneficiaries of the evaluand are

engaged from the start. The people are at the center of CRE. They are the experts in their own experience and belief system. They know what they value, what they need, what practices they engage in, and how best to address and respond to each factor.

Context

There are many cultural realities that constitute the cultural context of an evaluand. These various layers of context include historical, sociopolitical, community, and organizational levels. Historical context includes what has taken place around the evaluand and intended participants over time. History tells the evaluator about the origins and subsequent changes in the evaluand; it can provide deeper understanding of participant needs, past experiences of the community, and roots of the problem.

The sociopolitical context can influence the evaluand in many ways—from decisions around funding allocations to what types of programs are provided to who implements those programs and how. The community context includes the local community's resources and current, collective experiences that are often directed by cultural perspectives. It may include socioeconomic status, collective assets, possible trauma, and available resources. Finally, organizational context includes more localized facets such as who is facilitating the program and how and where the program is implemented. The intersection of all of these constitutes the current cultural context and is, thus, interdependent.

For example, a city may have had a history of financial misconduct. Education was not a priority in the sociopolitical environment and, therefore, has not received sufficient funding to provide the programming necessary for students to meet the statewide goals for reading and math test scores. The community of focus has experienced high rates of school dropout, unemployment, and violent crime. The violence adds additional stress for the students and interferes in their academic performance. As a result of the funding crisis, the city school board decides to lay off more experienced teachers and hire new and young teachers, many of whom do not know or respond to the culture and context of the students. This combination affects if and how certain programs are implemented and how the students perform.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness encompasses a sense of critical consciousness, intentional action, and flexibility. Ostensibly, these three aspects are guided by values including community, relationships, neutralizing power dynamics, social justice, and critical consciousness. CRE evaluators are, therefore, critically self-reflective and strive to hone their social and emotional intelligence in ensuring sound partnerships and data collection efforts. CRE allows for the necessarily organic- and human-centered structure of the program and evaluation to emerge.

Responsive evaluation places stakeholder engagement, relationships, and dialogue at its center. It includes stakeholders throughout the evaluation process and attends to their issues and needs. It is a democratic, empowerment-focused model where the stakeholders dictate the standards and describe the program practices and meaning from their perspective.

The main goal of responsive evaluation is program improvement, which happens through dialogue and relationship building between the different stakeholders. With a reflective mind-set, the evaluator facilitates these dialogues and working alliances. Ideally, those who have a stake in the evaluand will eventually take ownership and make changes through listening and responding to other vantage points and experiences.

The culturally responsive evaluator also learns and integrates the culture of the community for accurate evaluation. The evaluation questions, data collection tools, interpretations and analysis, and influence of dissemination can all be compromised if culture is ignored. Cultural knowledge and integration increases the validity of the tools, data, and analysis as well as the effect of the evaluation as a whole.

In CRE, the evaluation is a conduit not only for relationship building but also for cultural understanding and social justice. Here, the evaluator is both responsive to the stakeholders, particularly the beneficiary community, culture, and context, and responsible for ensuring the results that benefit the community. Furthermore, the relationship building, cultural responsiveness, and resultant data collection and analysis feed into and support empowerment.

Social Justice

The development of CRE has been guided by a desire to support oppressed and marginalized communities. Thus, the evaluation is a tool for social justice, partnering with the communities the evaluand serves to advocate for and with them. The process of the evaluation, from community partnership to advocacy, is itself an intervention, as the evaluand's beneficiaries and community members hold power positions within the evaluation. They craft evaluation questions, inform tool development, and have a say as to whether the evaluation is sound. Ideally, they also partner with the evaluator in advocating for changes, be it regarding the evaluand or sociopolitical context, for their community.

CRE Process

CRE has a prescriptive process in order to achieve its goals. Stafford Hood, Pamela Anderson-Frazier, and Rodney Hopson describe a detailed sequence of steps in conducting CRE. The following is a condensed version of the action steps:

Learn the culture and environment

This step includes both formal and informal assessments, such as spending time in and with the community and conducting semistructured interviews and focus groups, as well as gathering secondary data on the historical, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts.

Engage the people in the process

As with all evaluations, there are a variety of stakeholders who should be considered. However, CRE prioritizes the program beneficiaries and their community.

Develop culturally relevant evaluation design and tools

Here, culture and context are a core part of the evaluation, so the questions and tools consider, integrate, and reflect them.

Conduct the evaluation with the community

Community members are equal partners in the evaluation process, informing evaluation questions, tools, and analysis. Ideally, the evaluator also provides technical support, so members can participate as leaders throughout the evaluation.

Disseminate and advocate

Market lessons learned to foster social justice and a thriving community. The results of the evaluation not only contribute to program improvement but they also help to further the community as a whole.

CRE and Social Change

CRE is not only an approach to evaluation, it is also a tool for achieving social change, particularly with and for disenfranchised communities. Both within the process and as a product, the community is supported and encouraged to manifest its empowerment. This focus and partnership helps to enhance validity and provide data for program improvement tailored to that community and sustainable change through advocacy. Thus, it also involves strategy development both on the levels of program improvement and on the broader social change. Although this type of evaluation often requires additional resources, it is designed to yield more significant results for those who are frequently placed in the margins of society.

CRE in Practice

One example took place in Chicago, IL, with a predominantly low-income Latino community on the west side of the city. The evaluator was contracted to conduct a needs assessment of youth resources, such as after-school youth development programs focusing on STEM, sports, cooking, or the arts. The evaluator and team conducted an analysis of the context, including demographics, resources, sociopolitical issues, and community hardships. With the partner organization, they engaged 20 local parents in shaping the needs assessment process and crafting the assessment tools. They also trained the parents in data collection, and the parents applied their new skills and collected data from 1,500 people in the community. The evaluator, partner organization, and parents then came together and analyzed the data. They found, for example, that over half (60%) of youth whose families were surveyed were not involved in after-school programming and 80% of parents expressed a need for more youth programming in the community. The parents developed recommendations. The evaluator synthesized these in the report, and the parents used it as a tool for advocating for what they needed in the community.

From the beginning of the evaluation, the evaluator had to consider language, the vulnerability some community members felt around assessment, and the fear that some members had around their immigration status. Also, a significant cultural asset was the strong sense of community and service of the parents. The survey questions, focus group protocol, and overarching process were created with the consideration of language, sensitivity around possible fears, and knowledge of cultural assets.

In bringing the parents together for this assessment, there was more power and potential for broader community engagement, which was needed to galvanize additional members and advocate for filling the gaps in services discovered through the process. This partnership and responsiveness not only helped to ensure valid data were collected more easily and from

more people but also the results could be used to meet needs and support community empowerment.

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Further Readings

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