

Cultural Core Competencies: Perceptions of 4-H Youth Development Professionals

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As society grows increasingly diverse, it is critical that youth development professionals are equipped with cultural core competencies. This descriptive study gauged the perceived level of cultural competence among 4-H Youth Development professionals from a Southern state in the United States. Based on the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competency (PRKC) Model (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004), youth development professionals rated their cultural competence (equity, access, and opportunity) in eight core competency areas. Based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = No knowledge to 4 = Expert, youth development professionals evaluated their cultural competence ranging from 0.66 to 4.00. According to an interpretive scale, most youth development professionals rated their competence as intermediate. Participants reported the skills of active listening and an open attitude as areas in which they felt most competent. Areas of least competence were community outreach policies and procedures. No significant relationships existed between the demographic variables of gender, degree earned, and field of study when compared to perceived cultural competence. The findings will be used to detect deficiencies and create opportunities for professional training and development experiences in supporting the cultural competence and growth of youth professionals.

Keywords: competencies, cultural, equity, access, opportunity, diversity, professional, youth development

Introduction

Modern cross-cultural environments bring a host of opportunities and challenges to youth development professionals as this arena grows increasingly diverse, with minority youth currently composing over 40% of the United States population between the ages of 10 and 19 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The omnipresent element of culture infiltrates all areas of youth development practice, from the values and goals youth development professionals seek to embody in their work to the most minute communication efforts. To be successful practitioners

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in this multicultural society, they must exhibit a deep understanding and appreciation for the many cultural groups living in the U.S. today and the ways in which culture influences actions from all sides of youth. The skills necessary to navigate today's youth development world of practice include but are not limited to knowledge and skills for effective cross-cultural activity, such as cultural self-awareness and adaptability to differences; intercultural communication to effectively interpret meanings of others; and understanding of the impact of power, privilege, and oppression on individuals, groups, communities, and institutions. When prepared with diversity knowledge and skills, youth development professionals will be able to construct settings where equity, access, and opportunity are available to all youth, allowing them to reach their potential as capable, caring, and competent youth.

In Greenwood's (1957) classic article entitled "Attributes of a Profession," an in-depth examination of occupational research was utilized to determine what distinguished professions from nonprofessions. Two of the distinctive factors that differentiated professions from nonprofessions were a body of systematic theory that supports the profession's performance and professionals who have comprehension and expertise within a field. Professions need criteria to determine advancement along the pathway toward professional creditability (Greenwood, 1957).

McNamara (2007) identified competencies as general descriptions of the capabilities desired to accomplish a task or role within the organization. Competencies are tangible, research-based principles of practice that serve as a foundation for career structures and policies within the profession. Identified competencies are used as a foundation for training by aligning them with learning objectives.

Contemporary youth development core competency models provide a comprehensive overview of the knowledge and capabilities needed to be a successful youth development professional (Fox, Sasser, & Arcemont, 2013; Stone, 1997). Starr, Yohalem, and Gannett (2009) reviewed fourteen existing youth work competency models which target professionals working in after-school, school-age care, out-of-school, recreation, youth development, and youth service fields. Of the fourteen models reviewed, cross-cultural competence appeared in eleven. Interestingly, Starr et al. (2009) found that only one model listed the ability to work well with diverse children and youth as a core competency.

Contemporary cultural competency models from allied fields such as education and evaluation can begin to provide a comprehensive overview of the types of skills needed to be a successful youth development professional. In youth development, the term "cross-cultural" defines work within culturally-diverse populations and contexts. For youth development organizations working in conjunction with public institutions, such as schools and youth groups, the youth population being served reflects the new and ever-diversifying trends in local and national demographics. Diversity is multifaceted in these environments—reflecting several spectra of

income, ethnic, religious, lifestyle, and other cultural backgrounds. In such a diverse environment, the idea of “cross-cultural” practice appears passive rather than an active practice—a descriptive term addressing the situation, not the behavior, of the individuals who operate within it.

The need for an active and progressive response to the culturally-exclusive practices of applied fields in the age of cross-cultural activities has necessitated a rethinking of cultural sensibilities and interactions that work *with* rather than *on* these groups in order to meet the full potential of the field. The program development and evaluation arm of youth development has addressed this need specifically by adopting the standard of cultural competence (American Evaluation Association, 2011). The purpose of cultural competence in improving practice and programming is twofold. First, the concept of cultural competence identifies the many concrete and nuanced manifestations of culture (be it schools, families, peer groups, organizations, communities, etc.) and the elements that comprise them (language, politics, values, etc.). Second, cultural competence stresses the need for practitioners working in these applied fields to recognize these potential areas of cultural miscommunication and to proactively work to engage groups and group values in the processes, activities, and goals of the organization. As a result, cross-cultural is *where* we work and cultural competence is *how* we work in that arena successfully and equitably.

In light of these changing demographics and a strong desire from the field to meet the needs of the communities it serves, cultural competence becomes increasingly vital to cross-cultural youth development and the field as a whole as it evolves. The central elements of cultural competence—communication, engagement, and value inclusion—are introduced in the Equity, Access, and Opportunity competence component of the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competencies (PRKC) Model (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). For the purpose of this study, the equity, access, and opportunity domain is defined as interacting effectively and equitably with diverse individuals and building long-term relationships with diverse communities. This representation of cultural competence includes the following topics: personal readiness and sensitivity to issues of diversity; values and norms involved in diversity; practices involved in diversity; skill of active listening; skill of open attitude; skill of speaking consciously; diversity education programming efforts; diversity policies for community outreach; and procedures for community outreach.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceived level of competence among youth development professionals to guide professional and academic needs of youth professionals and their professional development. The research objectives of the study were to:

1. Describe the youth development professionals,
2. Determine the perceived level of professional competence of youth development professionals in the area of cultural competence, and
3. Determine if a relationship exists between selected demographic variables and level of perceived cultural competence.

Research Methodology

A census of youth development professionals affiliated with a Land-Grant University in the southern U.S. was conducted to explore the areas of interest above. Participants were identified using an online personnel directory which includes local, regional, and state youth development faculty. Following a review of the state youth development e-mail listserv, faculty who were no longer with the 4-H Youth Development program and those serving in an administrative capacity were removed from the e-mail list, resulting in a population of 127 youth development professionals. Because this was an internal organizational study, it was ruled by the Institutional Review Board that a review was not necessary. The instrument was adapted from identified requisite cultural competencies based on the Equity, Access, and Opportunity core competencies found within the 4-H PRKC Model (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). In addition, the research team developed a new construct focused on staffing structure and standards. Content validity for the instrument was determined by a panel of experts comprised of local youth development professionals, regional administrators, state level specialists, program administrators, and an evaluation specialist who were not part of the study population. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient (reliability) score of .957 was calculated based on sixteen items. Reliability coefficients of .80 are considered acceptable (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

The data were collected through Zoomerang, an online survey software program. Reminders were e-mailed to nonrespondents, obtaining a final response rate of 71% ($n = 91$). Nonresponse error was evaluated by comparing early to late respondents (Linder, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). Early respondents were defined as those who responded to the first stimulus ($n = 25$). Late respondents participated after receiving the reminder stimulus ($n = 66$). There was no statistical difference between early and late respondents on the evaluated items.

Findings

Objective One: Demographics of Youth Development Professionals

The majority of the respondents were White (86%) and female (61%). Seven percent of the respondents reported as African American, 1% reported as Hispanic, 1% reported as Native American, and the remaining 5% of respondents indicated "other" as their ethnic background.

The respondents reported being employed in their position for an average of 14.81 years ($SD = 8.568$) with a range of 2 years to 30 years.

The majority of the respondents (59%) had a master's degree plus some graduate hours, while 28% had a master's degree alone. Fifteen percent of the respondents held a bachelor's degree plus graduate hours, while only 2% had a bachelor's degree alone. Three percent of the respondents had a Ph.D. or Ed.D. The largest percentage (42%) of the respondents had a degree in human ecology. Twenty-two percent had degrees in animal science, while 13% had degrees in education. Twenty-three percent had degrees in the "other" category, including business, criminal justice, natural resources, horticulture, and science.

Objective Two: Perception of Cultural Competency

The perception of cultural competency was measured using a five-point Likert scale of 0 (*Knows nothing*) to 4 (*Expert knowledge*). Respondents reported an overall mean of 2.33 ($SD = .62$) with a range of 0.67 to 4.00. Participants felt most competent in the areas of active listening and open attitude. Participants felt less competent in areas related to diversity policies for community outreach and procedures for community outreach. All participants rated themselves as knowing at least *a little* in the core competency areas of personal readiness and sensitivity to issues of diversity and the skills of active listening and open attitude. Only one individual self-identified as an *expert* in the areas of personal readiness and sensitivity to issues of diversity, values and norms involved in diversity, and diversity education programming efforts.

An interpretive scale was applied to the item means to determine the level of proficiency using a modified version of the National Institutes of Health (2009) Competencies Proficiency Scale. *Novice*, the first proficiency level, indicated limited experience from the classroom or on-the-job training. *Intermediate*, the second level of proficiency, described individuals who have practical application and can independently perform the skill but might need expert assistance. The third level of proficiency, *advanced*, was being able to apply theory and carry out tasks without support. *Expert*, the highest proficiency level, was seen as a field authority. According to the interpretive scale, most participants were considered at the *intermediate* level in the cultural core competencies. Respondents considered themselves to be *novices* in the area of diversity policies for community outreach and procedures for community outreach. Additional information on participants' perception of cultural competencies is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Cultural Competency

| | Valid | | | | | Interpretive Scale ^b |
|---|-------|------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| | N | Min ^a | Max ^a | M ^a | SD ^a | |
| Personal readiness and sensitivity to issues of diversity | 91 | 1 | 4 | 2.45 | .69 | Intermediate |
| Values and norms involved in diversity | 91 | 0 | 4 | 2.31 | .80 | Intermediate |
| Practices involved in diversity | 91 | 0 | 4 | 2.25 | .81 | Intermediate |
| Skill of active listening | 91 | 1 | 4 | 2.67 | .68 | Intermediate |
| Skill of open attitude | 91 | 1 | 4 | 2.65 | .60 | Intermediate |
| Skill of speaking consciously | 91 | 0 | 4 | 2.49 | .74 | Intermediate |
| Diversity education programming efforts | 91 | 0 | 4 | 2.24 | .77 | Intermediate |
| Diversity policies for community outreach | 91 | 0 | 4 | 1.95 | .89 | Novice |
| Procedures for community outreach | 90 | 0 | 4 | 1.90 | .86 | Novice |

^aScale: 0 = *Knows nothing*; 1 = *Knows a little*; 2 = *Knows some*; 3 = *Knows quite a bit*; 4 = *Expert*.

^bInterpretive Scale: 0.00-0.99 = *Novice*; 1.00-1.99 = *Intermediate*; 2.00-2.99 = *Advanced*; 3.00-4.00 = *Expert*.

Objective Three: Relationship Between Demographic Variables and Level of Perceived Cultural Competence

Due to the presence of outliers, varying group sizes, and nonnormality of the participants' perceived cultural competence mean scores (Shapiro-Wilk test of normality reported significant values [$W = 0.964, p = .014$]), nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis H tests were utilized in comparing means between independent groups as shown below. Data skewness (-0.375) suggests a larger proportion of values at the higher end of the distribution. Pearson's correlations were utilized in exploring the relationship between variables where appropriate.

Gender. A Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated no statistically significant difference in cultural competence score between gender groups ($\chi^2 = 0.667, p = 0.414, df = 1, N = 87$), with a mean rank score of 41.25 for males and 45.76 for females. Three participants did not respond to this item.

Ethnicity. A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed no statistically significant difference in cultural competence score when ethnic background was considered ($\chi^2 = 0.686, p = 0.407, df = 1, N = 83$), with a mean rank score of 41.29 for Caucasian/Majority and 48.69 for minority ethnicities. Seven participants did not respond to this item.

Degree level. A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed no statistically significant difference in cultural competence score between the differing education levels ($\chi^2 = 0.730, p = 0.694, df = 2, N = 74$),

with a mean rank score of 34.54 for Bachelor's, 39.84 for Master's, and 35.93 for Master's Plus. Sixteen participants did not respond to this item.

Field of study. A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed no statistically significant difference in cultural competence score between the different field of study educational backgrounds ($\chi^2 = 0.513$, $p = 0.916$, $df = 3$, $N = 75$), with a mean rank score of 37.85 for Human Ecology/Home Economics, 39.55 for Animal Science, 34.64 for Education, and 34.57 for Other. Fifteen participants did not respond to this item.

Years of experience. A Pearson's correlation did not reveal a significant relationship between years of experience ($M = 14.81$, $n = 84$, $SD = 8.57$) and perceived cultural competency ($r = 0.19$, $p = .09$).

Limitations

Restricted by the small population, the study should be replicated on a broader scale to increase the inference base from which generalizations may be drawn. Results of this study are limited to the context of the competency model supported by the youth development organization under study. The self-report nature of this study could have yielded results that are potentially exaggerated and biased.

Discussion

Highest Cultural Competence Areas

While respondents reported intermediate levels of perceived competence in most of the areas examined within the cultural competence domain, active listening and open attitude emerged as areas in which participants felt most competent. This finding is in agreement with current research on core competencies that included active listening and an open attitude in their analysis. Rhode Island Department of Human Services (2009) and Stone and Rennekamp (2004) specifically identified active listening skills in their youth development core competencies. Several professional associations acknowledged nonverbal and verbal communication skills as critical core competencies (Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, 2010; Charles Stuart Mott Foundation, 2009; Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2009).

In other studies, active listening and an open attitude were often paired together in core areas of interpersonal skills, communication, or cultural sensitivity. Harder, Place, and Scheer (2010) posit that highly effective Extension educators possess strong interpersonal skills and cooperate with diverse groups of people. A Delphi study focused on a Competency-Based Extension Education Curriculum identified interpersonal skills (which included communication, cultural

sensitivity, and relationship building) as one of two critical competencies for Extension professionals (Harder et al., 2010). The National Collaboration for Youth recognized communication skills, which encompassed listening in a nonjudgmental manner, using respectful language, and displaying concern for the well-being and feelings of others (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004). The *Competencies for Professional Child & Youth Work Practitioners* (Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, 2010), the *Core Competencies for Afterschool Educators* (Charles Stuart Mott Foundation, 2009), and the *Florida Core Competencies for Afterschool Practitioners* (Florida Steps to Success Afterschool Career Pathways, 2011) included recognition and respect for diversity, as well as promotion of sensitivity toward individual, cultural, and human diversity.

Areas of Least Competence

The areas of least perceived competence reported by the respondents were “knowledgeable of diversity policies” and “procedures for community outreach.” This was an interesting finding considering the applied community-based work in which the study respondents are engaged. The community plays an important role in positive youth development and is present in numerous youth development core competency models. Community context and culture play a critical role in the healthy development of adolescents (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In his Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) combines resilience and positive youth development within a cultural-ecological transitional theoretical framework. Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, and Noam (2011) identify the adolescent, family, school, community, and culture as part of the factors that are included in and also influence the systems model. The cultural-ecological framework is critical as it brings understanding and meaning to environments, experiences, opportunities, and exchanges between adolescents, their settings, and their evolving paths.

Several youth development core competency models recognize the critical links between positive youth development and community connections, e.g., *Competencies for Professional Child & Youth Work Practitioners*, *Core Competencies for Afterschool Educators*, *Florida Core Competencies for Afterschool Practitioners*, *Rhode Island Core Knowledge and Core Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals*, *School Age/Youth Development Core Knowledge and Credential*, *Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals* (Astroth et al., 2004; Association for Child and Youth Care Practice, 2010; Charles Stuart Mott Foundation, 2009; Colorado Office of Professional Development, 2005; Florida Steps to Success Afterschool Career Pathways, 2011; Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2009; Stone & Rennekamp, 2004; Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2009). Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzales, Craig, and Haile (2011) found that networking received significant interest as being the most critical core competency in the early career months.

Community outreach is not only critical for positive youth development and recognized as an essential core competency for youth development professionals, but it is also a key component of any community-based organization. In a time of decreased fiscal and human resources and increased public cynicism, public organizations must reach out and connect with local communities and their stakeholders (Kettl, 2000, 2002; Osborne & Hutchinson, 2004; Peters & Pierre, 2003). Without continued efforts to this end, public and nonprofit organizations will be challenged to meet their objectives, produce worth, reply successfully to community changes, or validate their sustained presence. Therefore, dynamic outreach efforts resulting in public value are critical to achieve a desirable fit with the environment (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Kraatz & Zajac, 2001).

Demographics and Competence

Interestingly, there were no other significant relationships between perceived cultural competence and the demographic variables of gender, ethnicity, degree level, years of experience, and field of study. Additional studies found no significant relationships between competence and educational level, field of study, and ethnic background (Burke, 2003; Fox et al., 2013; Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2014). Fox et al. (2013) found a positive relationship between 4-H Youth Agents' youth development competence and years of experience. Additional studies found a link between competence and years of experience among Extension staff (Burke, 2003; Lakai et al., 2014).

With no significant relationship between education level and level of competence, multiple educational pathways must be devised in order to prepare youth development professionals to meet the needs of diverse young people (Borden, Craig, & Villarruel, 2004; Borden & Perkins, 2006). A wide variety of college majors represent the individuals attracted and hired to do youth development work. With this in mind, it is recommended that university faculty incorporate and promote culturally competent instruction, practices, and experience. Harder et al. (2010) reinforced this belief with the recommendation that Extension education curricula should include cultural competence, particularly the area of outreach strategies and policies.

The study findings encourage a continued look at the connection between ethnic diversity of staff and staff's scoring in the cultural competence domain. The results of the comparison between minority and nonminority participants suggest that the effect of emerging from a diverse background may be inhibited by lack of training in bringing cultural competency principles into practice or lack of pathways for action within the organization. Furthermore, additional exploratory qualitative work into the actions, processes, and experiences of individuals addressing cultural competencies in their work may shed light on participants' interpretations and manifestations of cultural competence in practice.

Knowledge Versus Application

Cultural competence aptitude and practice among youth development professionals is necessary to ensure that the values and cultures of an increasingly diverse population is engaged in an organization's programs (Williams, 2001). The differences in participants' proficiency scores illustrate a dichotomy that remains between *what* and *where* cross-cultural competency takes place and *how* it takes place. Study participants' item response averages ranked consistently in the *intermediate* range, between 2 (*Knows some*) and 3 (*Knows quite a bit*), in cultural competency areas of awareness and of skills necessary and indispensable in the practice of culturally competent work, but faltered to the *novice* range, between 1 (*Knows a little*) and 2 (*Knows some*), in areas of knowledge regarding turning those skills into action, such as knowledge of policies and procedures regarding community outreach. Results suggest that the participants are familiar with the concepts of cultural competence in their practice and are relatively confident in the skills and abilities needed for practice in this arena, but they lack the knowledge regarding methods and avenues for putting these into practice.

Since cultural competence areas seem to be well-documented in the youth development core competencies literature, the researchers wonder if the self-reporting nature of the survey might have resulted in positive support for the *idea* of cultural competence described above due to an expectation of competence and not participants' actual perceived ability, conceivably resulting in the lack of action surrounding cultural competence, particularly community outreach policies and procedures. Miller and Hall (2005) reinforced this concept when they found a lack of intentionality in building upon or integrating cultural and ethnic backgrounds in curriculum materials or activities in afterschool programs.

Training and Development

With the changing demographics in today's society, building a culturally-competent youth development workforce is critical in reaching and making a difference in the lives of young people. Several studies have shown the link between professional competence and positive youth outcomes. Honig and McDonald (2005) found a positive relationship between capable professionals and constructive adolescent impacts. Noam (2008) discovered capacity building training was linked to strong afterschool programs that positively impacted the youth.

In developing cultural competence capacity, it is imperative to reach newly-selected youth development professionals. New Extension Agent orientation plays an important role in providing new professionals with a critical foundation to build core competencies (Ezell, 2003; Lakai et al., 2014; Maddy, Niemann, Lindquist, & Bateman, 2002). Given the relationship between years of experience and competence in other studies, it is recommended that new

employees are connected with an experienced mentor who has shown an aptitude for cultural competence (Burke, 2003; Lakai, et al., 2014).

Researchers recommended professional development plans as a mechanism to support growth of core competencies in youth development professionals (Maddy et al., 2002). Components of a professional development plan can include but are not limited to ongoing training, mentoring, communities of practice, study tours, graduate work, and professional associations. Strong and Harder (2009) found that participation in professional associations aided Extension staff in learning about their field of work. Based on the study findings, it is important that all training and development strategies that are employed provide youth development professionals with the opportunity to apply knowledge and theory to real-world settings.

Conclusion

With changing demographics, youth development organizations hire and engage professionals who understand, value, and can apply cross-cultural approaches. Cultural core competency models provide a valuable framework in hiring cultural sensitive professionals, developing high quality orientation, designing relevant professional development plan-, structuring capacity building training, and supporting meaningful mentoring. With leadership from cultural competent youth development professionals, youth development organizations can create rich learning environments and experiences that help youth learn and embrace an appreciation for cultural diversity.

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