



**BETTER WAY FOUNDATION
INDIGENOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECD) COHORT**

**Indigenous Evaluation Process
Executive Summary**

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CREATING AN UNDERSTANDING (OVERVIEW)



Figure 1. Our Collaborative Evaluation Process

The Better Way Foundation (Minneapolis, MN) contacted Dr. Valdez of Native Pathways (Laguna, NM) in February 2019 in order to engage the consulting group in an evaluation process with the Indigenous Early Childhood Development (IECD) cohort with the aim of centering an Indigenous paradigm and core values. As part of this process, Dr. Valdez engaged Jill Stein of JKS Consulting (Corvallis, OR) to join her in supporting the development of an Indigenous evaluation process for the cohort, which includes the following three regions: 1) Ojibwe and Dakota Nations (Minnesota); 2) Pine Ridge / Lakota Nation and Lower Sioux (South Dakota); and 3) Pueblos of Cochiti, Walatowa, and Isleta (New Mexico). Dr. Valdez and Ms. Stein have been collaborating on cross-cultural evaluation for nearly 20 years and specialize in blending

Indigenous and western perspectives of evaluation through a collaborative evaluation approach (see Figure 1).

Using collaborative and participatory approaches that engaged BWF staff and IECD Cohort partners throughout the process, the evaluation team was guided by the questions/statements outlined below (see Table 1). Statements are used to express intentionality and to honor

Indigenous perspectives around questioning, which can be experienced negatively due to intergenerational trauma imposed by western research and evaluation (Smith, 2021¹).

Table 1. Evaluation Questions and Statements for the IECD Cohort

Evaluation Questions	Evaluation Statements
How is evaluation currently used by the IECD programs?	The evaluation team seeks to understand how evaluation is currently used by the IECD programs.
What would an indigenous evaluation process look like for the Cohort and how could success be defined collectively across the cohort?	The evaluation team seeks to document what an Indigenous evaluation process could look like for the Cohort and how success for Indigenous early childhood education programs might be defined collectively.
What does success of Early Childhood education look like from community-based perspectives?	The evaluation team seeks to understand and document what success of early childhood education could look like from community-based perspectives.

In order to address these focus areas, the evaluation team engaged the IECD Cohort partners (“partners”) in a series of six virtual Talk Story Dialogues, as well as building an ongoing dialogue with the Better Way Foundation executive director and program manager (“BWF staff”) to support shared learning, build relationship, and better align evaluation activities to community needs, as well as to build connections to the foundation’s strategic directions. After the first year of engaging and planning with the BWF staff and partners, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, which led the evaluation team to shift directions in order to be responsive to the needs of the partners and build a supportive and safe space for sharing what they were going through. Based on feedback from partners, the evaluation team continued to facilitate Talk Story dialogues throughout the pandemic, rather than traveling to the communities to conduct site visits and gather data from community members – which was no longer a safe, appropriate, or viable option. Dialogue topics were determined in collaboration with the partners, and the conversations lasted about 1.5 to 2 hours each. The conversations were recorded via Zoom with permission from participants, transcribed, and analyzed for key themes using content analysis software. A brief memo report was developed and shared with the partners and BWF staff following each dialogue. The current document summarizes findings across the two years of engaging with the Cohort (See Table 2).

¹ Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books Ltd.

Table 2. Summary of Methods and Focus Areas for Indigenous Evaluation Process

Timeline	Methods	Focus	Participants
March 2019	Appreciative Inquiry; Talk Story Dialogue	Indigenous Evaluation Processes	7 individuals ²
May-Dec 2019	Planning calls; one site visit (Isleta, NM)	Program Contexts, Evaluation practices	4 programs
June 2020	Talk Story Dialogue	COVID-19 Check-in	7 individuals
September 2020	Document Analysis; Talk Story Dialogue	Strategic Planning	7 individuals
March 2021	Talk Story Dialogue	Community Resilience	8 individuals
June 2021	Talk Story Dialogue	Indigenous Evaluation Processes, Future Directions	6 individuals

WHAT WE LEARNED (KEY FINDINGS)

Key findings are shared based on the main evaluation focus areas as follows: 1) current use of evaluation; 2) elements of an Indigenous evaluation process; and 3) definitions of success for and across the IECD Cohort; and 4) Future Directions and Areas of Support. An additional dialogue area (5) that emerged through the evaluation process addresses how the Cohort, their programs and communities have navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on communities.

HOW PROGRAMS USE EVALUATION

"It's really hard to quantify, the Lakota and Ojibwe are relational. And when you talk about metacognition, our children are learning to realize that the trees have our life, that the Earth is alive, and they're learning how to put tobacco out, how to smudge, how to sing in our languages, how to say those thank-you songs. How do you quantify that?"

Cohort partners struggle to align western systems for defining outcomes and metrics with Indigenous core values, epistemologies, and internal protocols – which translate into community-based life skills that can be challenging, inappropriate, and in some instances, disrespectful to quantify. Partners shared that evaluation processes are typically externally defined by funders through western assessment tools and metrics, which do not adequately convey community-based values or definitions of success. Partners talked about the way they navigate this space in the following ways:

- Adapting western-based tools to better reflect community values;
- Engaging community elders (“grandmothers”) to facilitate assessments in a way that is more comfortable and based in story and relationship;

² Numbers include IECD Cohort partners only; they are not inclusive of evaluators or BWF staff who participated in some of the calls

- Documenting successes of the program through story (e.g. a “story box” where staff can document stories of success); and observation of students engaged in cultural activities in which they actively demonstrate and express cultural values;
- Reframing the language of evaluation, such as using terms like “community inquiry” instead of evaluation, which can be a scary term for families in their communities; and
- Creating an Indigenous-based logic model building off a cultural metaphor or image, such as a dreamcatcher, and core values.

ELEMENTS OF AN INDIGENOUS EVALUATION PROCESS

Cohort partners support the idea of developing an Indigenous evaluation framework and process to support their programmatic goals and community wellbeing. Partners shared many elements that they feel are important to include in an Indigenous evaluation process in order to be relevant and meaningful within their communities, as shared below:

- *Reflect cultural knowledge and values* – An Indigenous evaluation process must be centered and built around core values from a community-based perspective, and core values should form the basis for documenting outcomes;
- *Focus on storytelling* – Story is an essential communication tool for the transfer of knowledge and valuing storytelling as evidence should be central to evaluation within an Indigenous context;
- *Be holistic and inclusive* – Indigenous models of evaluation look holistically at family and community outcomes, engagement and the learning environment.
- *Include spirituality and emotional expressions* – It is important to engage the whole child, including mental, spiritual, cultural and emotional well-being. This means using outcomes that go beyond cognitive or developmental gains or language acquisition alone, which oftentimes are isolated by western evaluation tools.
- *Support healing from intergenerational trauma* – Evaluation needs to be inclusive of healing, building resilience, and supporting truth and reconciliation processes, because of the continued oppression that Native peoples experience through western educational pathways. To support holistic well-being, Native people need a safe space to release and western institutions need to recognize that addressing trauma and healing are part of the learning environment.
- *Embrace non-competitive and non-quantitative measures* – Finding ways to shift the paradigm of evaluation and assessment away from quantitative measures that are comparative will help support genuine growth.
- *Embed evaluation in learning* – Support processes that weave evaluation into the learning process in natural and cultural ways, rather than using a testing model; such as, use cultural practices for assessing knowledge gains and growth, and avoid over-evaluating.

"The indigenous evaluation process within the program or community... should just be embedded within the curriculum, within the lessons. It should look like something that parents or grandparents do with children at home. It should be natural, it should be lots of modeling, hands on, and using the language."

DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS FROM INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES

“Maybe as we move forward this is the discussion is how would we measure (spirituality and healing)? Because the ceremonies are really important, I think, to help in healing in many of our communities. You need a strengthening community, but I don't know how you measure that.”

Partners defined success in terms of community impact at a holistic level that includes the individual child, family and community. They shared that definitions of success should be grounded in cultural knowledge, language, place, and core values. Following are some of the key metrics of success shared by partners:

- *Student growth and development of their cultural identity*, such as by demonstrating pride and confidence as they engage in cultural activities and utilize their language.
- *Community wellbeing and healing from intergenerational trauma*, which is nurtured through cultural knowledge, practices, and relationship to the land.
- *Collective action and advocacy efforts* at the partnership level (collective impact) to support educational sovereignty, tribal sovereignty, and Nation-building.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND AREAS OF SUPPORT NEEDED

Partners reflected on future directions and areas of support needed to continue activating early childhood learning that **centers Indigenous core values, relationship to place and land, tribal sovereignty, and community resilience**. Recommendations from the partners were shared around the following key areas:

- *Support continued engagement and knowledge sharing across the Cohort* – From an Indigenous perspective, relationships have been built and nurtured among the cohort partners and through the Indigenous evaluation process and dialogues. It is essential to find mechanisms to keep supporting this relationship building, such as by continuing the facilitated dialogues, creating opportunities for sharing updates and resources, or growing a broader Community of Practice around Indigenous early childhood education.
- *Continue to grow pathways for developing and supporting Indigenous evaluation processes* – This could include supporting professional development and training around Indigenous evaluation, perhaps as part of the budget awarded to grantees. This would help support internal capacity building around evaluation, which is essential to decolonizing evaluation practices.
- *Compile resources that can be shared across the network* – This could include developing a repository of tools that reflect an Indigenous approach to evaluation, and resources such as articles and other publications (such as the AIHEC Indigenous Evaluation Framework³).

³ <https://portalcentral.aihec.org/Indigeval/Pages/Document-Collections.aspx>

- *Support advocacy for Indigenous worldviews of education* – One potential use of evaluation shared by the cohort partners was to document the value of Indigenous learning environments and processes. Evaluation can also support advocacy efforts for Indigenous approaches to early childhood education and support their ability to seek other funding sources. They also suggested building national partnerships (such as with Headstart) to help create a broader national advocacy network.

RESPONSES TO COVID-19: COMMUNITY WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE

While this was not an initial part of the evaluation goals, there was an emerging need to focus on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on community well-being. Overall, partners emphasized the ways in which **communities came together and demonstrated core values of care, responsibility, service, and resilience**. Communities have continued to face significant challenges in terms of meeting basic needs, continuing learning for children, accessing the internet, and staying connected to community. The following strategies, shared by cohort partners, demonstrated community resilience during this time:

- Creating safe and healthy spaces for children to learn
- Demonstrating care for community by offering food, supplies, learning activities, internet access, technology support and training, and opportunities for community connection
- Providing social and emotional support for children and families
- Collaborating with other organizations in the community to address family and community needs
- Re-engaging with and amplifying Indigenous core values, such as connection to the land, seasonal cycles, traditional foods, and cultural practices

BEING MINDFUL (RECOMMENDATIONS)

Provide opportunities for additional, ongoing training around Indigenous evaluation practices – There is considerable interest and excitement among cohort members around continued engagement with Indigenous evaluation processes. BWF could consider supporting ongoing training around Indigenous evaluation for the cohort, perhaps as part of the budget awarded to grantees. This would help develop the internal capacity building around evaluation, which is essential to decolonizing evaluation practices, as well as providing important data to document outcomes of programming from Indigenous worldviews. This could include developing a repository of tools that reflect an Indigenous approach to evaluation.

Support continued dialogue across the cohort – The IECD cohort would like to continue coming together around dialogue, as well as sharing updates, tools, strategies, and resources, in order to build their networks and strengthen their practices. The foundation of a community of practice is being developed and needs to be continually nurtured for it to be sustained. This could also be an environment in which new grantees are brought into the fold and connected to other programs doing similar work.

Reflect on the concepts of sustainability and grantee “life cycles” from an Indigenous worldview – As BWF explores ways to help funded programs/partners transition toward sustainability, we recommend approaching this notion with the idea that Indigenous nations have been sustainable and have sustained themselves for thousands of years (that is, an asset-based vs. deficit-based approach). Recognizing that from Indigenous perspectives, relationship building is for a lifetime, reflect on how to honor this within the “life cycle” of granting. One approach is to engage longer-standing programs as mentor or model programs to newer grantees. That is, rather than cycling partners through funding, it is more about growing and nurturing the network.

Assess the current model of evaluation tools that BWF uses and adopt an Indigenous evaluation framework for reporting – Some cohort members are already working on Indigenous evaluation frameworks that are specific to their community, and there are other examples that could help guide the development of an IECD framework, building off what was created by the evaluation team and creating a menu of Indigenous-based approaches to documenting outcomes.

Continue to push forward on processes that support truth telling and transparency, particularly around how funders have gained their wealth and their complicity in systems of colonization, and how they commit to supporting conflict resolution and reconciliation processes that will help in the healing of Indigenous Nations.