

Part 5:

Cultural Relevance



Designing the NE intervention was a collaborative process over 15 years between the Fort Peck Tribes and Montana State University. Using community-based participatory research methods and principles, adaptations of NE took 12 months to complete. There were many cultural aspects that were considered when developing and designing NE; they are detailed in this section.



What is culture, and how does culture look, especially in public schools? This is what the cultural component addresses and why it is important.

– Ramey GrowingThunder

This [NE] is a model, you prepare for ceremonies. Everyone does this differently. This is how we did it. You will figure yours out.

- Paula Firemoon



The family tree exercise.

This can be defeating for certain people if they don't know their parents. The way Olivia delivers this... is good. We joke about kissing cousins. Historically grandparents would tell you who your relatives were. But we have fractures in our family. I can see the shift from when I was a kid.

My father

never had conversations with us outside of our immediate family. It's important to do the family tree. In every class I have been in, kids find out they are related to one another or even to us. I am your auntie, grandmother, uncle etc.. Every time we see them, we address them in that way, hey nephew, etc.

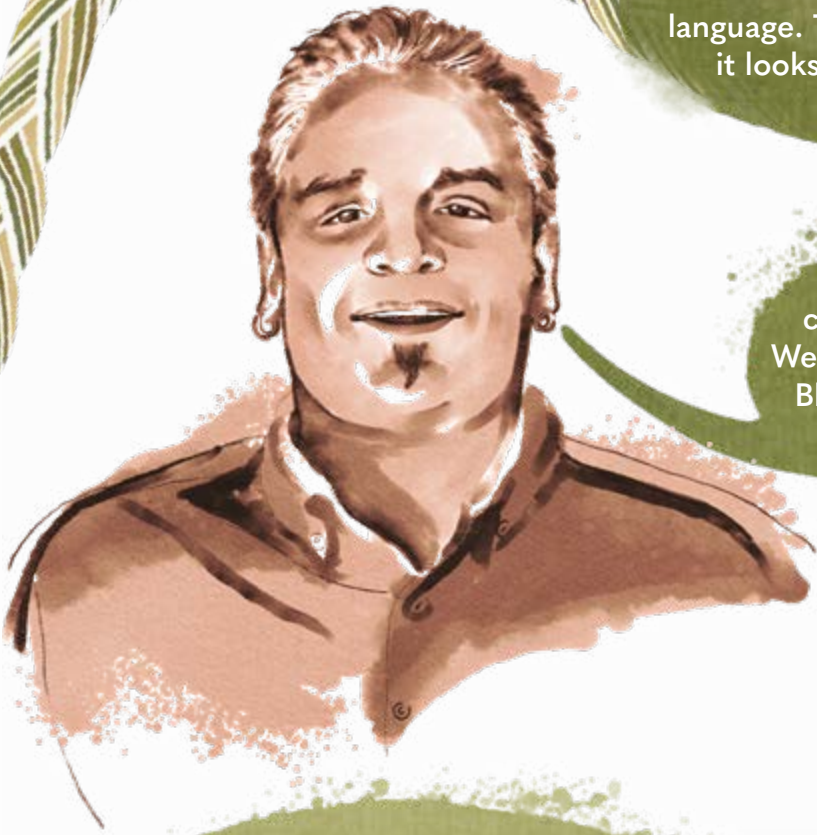
They

understand who their relatives are. There may be someone in that family tree that they could reach out to. It's an opportunity to know who they are. Who am I? Is there a safe place for me? We want to give our youth as much opportunity to support them.

Kids, their eyes are still wide open, they are thinking and dreaming, We need to help influence them in a good way.

- Marty Reum





For urban settings, this can be adapted. Find out what people can teach students. Learning something, a Native language. They would have to figure out what it looks like.


This is about understanding family components. Understanding ceremony. We travel all over with Gros Ventre, Sioux, Blackfeet, Cree, etc. We are always thinking good thoughts.

- Marty Reum

It's important to find champions. Each of these people who are involved in the cultural mentoring and designing modules, they are the champions. They are not just people who show up. I watched Marty implement the cultural lessons a few weeks ago. I was super excited. It's that important to him. You can see his enthusiasm. That's the recipe for success. SRH is not always the easiest to talk about.

- Molly Secor





I did attend some of
the advisory board meetings.
To introduce the cultural component.
Initially I designed the cultural lessons that
are implemented in the project. Looking back
at the cultural component, I picked out
specific lesson plans to target specific
areas.

- Ramey GrowingThunder

Historical Framework & Understanding Local Statistics

There are historical perspectives for studying sexual and reproductive health disparities with Native American communities. It is essential to know this history and perspective before beginning the NE or any SRH related efforts in Indian Country.

What I learned from Fort Peck is going to be very different than working with another tribe. Take time to understand the local history and relationships between families. I remember Paula telling me once...


What I can say is that when you are going to go about working on a program that addresses SRH, you have to understand the local history of the Tribe. Their relationship with colonization. Their relationship with intergenerational trauma. Their relationships... how they got to where they are today. You have to situate your work within that context. Every tribe is different.

...There are key families and people in the community that make everything happen and make sure everything is taken care of. As an outsider I am not going to know who those people are. It was a perfect teaching for me around understanding, there is family histories and family dynamic histories in relation to the tribal community about things are.



- Beth Rink

Culture of SRH



You have to look at the culture of different age groups. The classes in high school between 2016 and 2019 have different experiences vs. 2020 to 2024. Culture is constantly evolving, you have to consider the influence of technology with youth. The pandemic influenced the culture of youth. Even the culture of relationships and sexual health.

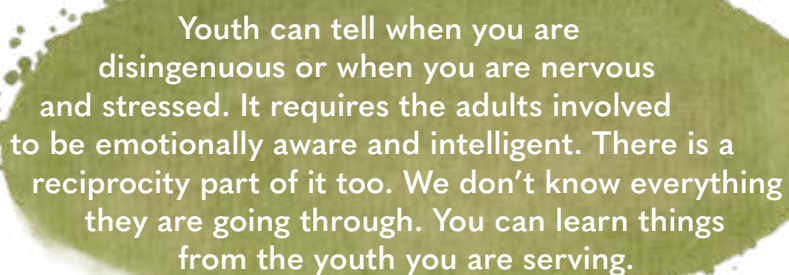
Always understanding that. Youth is not always the same. How we respond to things is not the same as another group. The culture in each community is different. We are all from the same reservation, the communities in each school system are different. Poplar might be more engaged, Wolf Point shy, Brockton takes time to gain trust.

Being mindful of this. An effective research project is the connection and engagement piece that staff are able to do. Having people from our community- Olivia has been an educator for years. She knows how to connect with kids.

It might not be a prerequisite for other programs, but you must know how to teach and engage. Same with Marty, he's a good people person. He knows that the most important thing is resting and creating open communication.

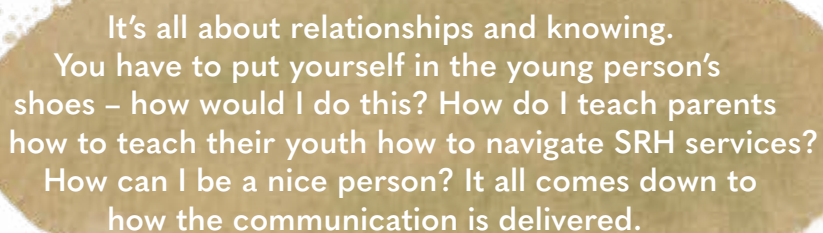
- Adriann Ricker

Engaging authentically



Youth can tell when you are disingenuous or when you are nervous and stressed. It requires the adults involved to be emotionally aware and intelligent. There is a reciprocity part of it too. We don't know everything they are going through. You can learn things from the youth you are serving.

-Adriann Ricker



It's all about relationships and knowing. You have to put yourself in the young person's shoes – how would I do this? How do I teach parents how to teach their youth how to navigate SRH services? How can I be a nice person? It all comes down to how the communication is delivered.

- Marty Reum



Stigma

You have to
normalize it within yourself.

If we are going to talk about sexual
health constructively, you have to engage in
conversations and not be embarrassed. We
talked about this with the tribal council.

We live in a hypersexualized
society.

It does not promote conversations
about how to engage in those relationships
in a healthy way. You take responsibility in your
body and relationships. If we look at boarding
schools and Christianity - we have a weird
dynamic, nobody wants to talk
about it.

Parents and guardians want
their kids to hear that information. Our
leaders do as well. Talking about it. In an open
way. Create space. No judgment about things they
don't know. If we can talk about it jokingly, we can talk
about it constructively. It's about creating an open
environment to have those conversations in
a healthy way.

Some
tribes might think this as
taboo. We talked about that at the
beginning of. I took the Montana high school
standards for 9 to 12th graders. Know your state
standards for health education for high schools, make
sure that your lessons meet those standards. Olivia
taught in school for 14 years, then she joined
me. She totally understands that kind of
stuff.

To
get buy-in from the school
and parents, if you are meeting state
standards, you are okay. We are lucky here in
Montana. We have an Indian Education for All Act.
You have to teach culture about reservations in
Montana. That is why we are able to attend
all of those cultural lessons there

—Paula Firemoon

Cultural Framework

Developing a cultural framework begins with understanding the “family structures” a Native American reservation/community where you plan to implement the Native STAND curriculum. For most Tribes, the concept of “family” is defined by their cultural framework for determining familial relationships, gender roles, childbearing and the upbringing of children. During the era of colonization, the Native American concept of family transitioned to the Christian model of an “immediate” family structure. Prior to this Native Americans existed in an “expanded” family structure that focused on survival of the entirety of the Tribe.

Traditional SRH Practices

Every tribe has traditional sexual reproductive health practices in place. These are rooted in ceremonies, family/kinship structures, gender roles, and coming of age ceremonies.

The following pages feature words from Marty Reum on this cultural framework from the Fort Peck tribes.



Ceremonies

Tribal ceremonies/events conducted by Tribes' elders required participation by the entirety of the Tribes' members. The ceremony for young Tribal members was the "coming of age", meaning when a young child became a woman or a man. When a young girl started her first menstruation or when a young boy completed a fasting period alone in the wilderness a coming of age ceremony was done. This ceremony was for the entire Tribal membership acknowledging they were no longer children and they were now able to create and bear children for the prosperity of the Tribe. This ceremony was also a recognition of a person going to the next stage within the circle of life. For young women, the coming of age ceremony emphasized the importance of a young woman's responsibility of bearing and taking care of the camp. They were no longer children in the care of their grandparents and had responsibilities of preparing meals and being a protector of the camp while the men were away hunting during the day. For young men, the coming of age ceremony was to prepare them to hunt with the men to provide food for the entirety of the Tribes. When an attack by enemies occurred while the men were there, the young men also had responsibility as a new warrior to protect the safety of the camp.

Family Structures

The biggest thing is that the concept of families is different now. Let our youth know that if mom or dad is missing, how this breaks down in the function of the family is drastic. I don't put them out or ask them to raise their hands. I tell them how I grew up. How it was difficult for me to be present in school. I was in constant survival mode. Our youth are feeling that now. We talk about extended family, your relatives, people have been adopted, they are not ceremonially your relatives. I have a ton of those people who helped me when I was struggling. Everyone understands we have a mother, father, siblings and grandparents. But when parents are missing, the grandparents take on this role. There are kids who are missing something. They are having to bear the responsibility of what they were meant to do. Crawl, talk, walk, speak the language, understand things in the camp systems. When grandparents are the parents, there is not a lot of time for that and those teachings. We tell the youth that if you grow up in that environment, you can change. As our youth are transitioning, we talk from 7th grade to seniors, it is relative to every grade.

Gender Roles

This connects with the family. What are the roles of a man? If we talk about the lodge setting, what were the men's roles? Men's responsibilities were to hunt, ceremony, and go to war. They had to be proficient to ensure our survival. Women were tasked with everything, making teepees, clothes, skin the buffalo, gathering medicines and berries. That is why our grandparents' roles are so important. The parents are busy. A lot of times now, the father is absent, the mother is taking on all of that. It adds to the stress. Mothers are having a tough time. We have homes where there are no grandparents available. I did not have that other piece to go to to shelter me from what was happening. Where we were before, where we are now. Men need to be in the outer circle. That is their role when they become a man. When you become a woman, this is your role. It doesn't mean they cannot be fluid. This is what kept everybody safe. There are similarities in today's society.

Coming of Age Ceremonies

There were ceremonies for both, it was announced. When they become of age, it means they are becoming a man or woman. It was prayed about. Everyone in the lodge knew that they were going to become men and women. Relationships were formed way younger than they are now, for the survival of our people. Back in the day if you were 50 or 55 years old, this was old but now grandparents are 60,70,80. We visit with the youth about this. At 7th and 8th grade, women are experiencing the change. Young men are coming into puberty. There were ceremonies that celebrated that. WE need to revisit that, it was a celebration. It signifies that young girls are becoming women in the second circle. Their mothers will become grandparents. The cycle has to be constant. When we are missing pieces... I don't know if these are still performed or celebrated. We need to talk about how we bring that back and celebrate our adolescents going into adulthood.


Colonization

When we talk about this, it happens in the conversation of what used to be and what is now. In Indian culture, there is no such thing as great aunt, third cousin, etc in our culture that is grandparents. It was very simplistic. If you were a cousin, you were a cousin. If my brother had a child and he had a child, that is my child. We don't go that far out and remove. I love that about our cultural way of life. Even if it's fractured. It helps our children have so many more people who are not so distant. We don't reference Sitting Bull as our great, great, great, great, great, grandfather, that is just your grandfather. Colonization has placed its fingers on who we are. Now we have people who are aware and working to decolonize and get back to thinking Indian. We got to talk about language, ceremony. We talk about the Dawes Act, smallpox, relocation- these things that have impacted our ability to stay together.

We think it's way back but it's not. I am the first generation of my family surviving boarding school. Although colonization efforts to alter the family structure to immediate family only, the traditional cultural concept of an expanded family structure has been revived in the boarding school era. Although many Native American families have embraced Christian religious practices, the Tribal elders have passed down an all-inclusive meaning of family relationships.


For other tribes, here is the framework, it will look different in Lame Deer, down south... the basis is still the same. Let's talk about these issues and topics, and how they affect us and how we can take control of these things and start to be healthy.

- Marty Reum



When we go into schools.... We tell them, we want to teach you about sex ed. You need to know your family histories. You need to create a family tree. They ask why. We say we don't want you dating a first cousin or people you are related to. When we get to lessons about sex ed, we can say, see you don't want to be involved with your family members because it can give birth defects.

Eventually they understand why we do it. With preventing pregnancies, we bring in the lesson about what it means from a cultural standpoint of what it means to have a baby. It's a gift from the creator, you need to take care of it. It's not because your boyfriend wants you to have it, this baby is given to you as a gift. We stress different values, our cultural belief values, we also talk about sexual orientation.



With the Assiniboiné and Sioux,
you have your medicine men, chief, all the
different people, sweat people, backwards people,
etc. We call them the seven sacred beings. Man and
woman are at the bottom of that. That's why we have
the cultural point person, they need to understand
how this fits into their lives as a Native
American.

We bring
in a cultural lesson in
our Native culture. We have the
seven sacred beings, one is the xx, a
two-spirited person. This is who we are, part
of who we are, we would not have a Native
American name for it if it did not exist
somewhere back in our future. This is
the basis of the 2 spirit revolution
coming on.

—Paula Firemoon