Wisdom Projects, Inc.

Reimagining Education | Reimagining Peace | Reimagining the World

How Wisdom Projects, Inc. Measures Its Impact

Wisdom Projects, Inc. conducts movement organizing, community-building, and structured learning for peacemaking and violence prevention within key epicenters of neighborhood violence in the greater Baltimore City area. After 2019, we have been embedded within the McKim Center community in East Baltimore where we work with youth and families who live in four housing projects located around the center: Albemarle Square; Pleasant View Gardens; Latrobe Homes; and Douglass Homes. We measure our impact in two ways:

1. We fulfill national standards for youth and family engagement (such as those valued by the Maryland Out of School Time Network and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality—see an overview of these standards at the end of this document); and

2. We adhere to the tenets of culturally responsive evaluation (CRE). 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."[*]

About CRE

Dominica McBride explains CRE in the following manner:

> 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 evaluation and 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 evaluation and its intended beneficiaries. It not only considers context but also uses it as data to understand the participants and a compass to direct the program in ways that lead to justice for that community. Cultural context also [...] builds the understanding necessary to identify what justice would mean to and for that community.

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

We view the creation and maintenance of a continuously peaceful, intelligent community in which community members' resources, education, and health are uplifted and they are empowered to care for themselves and their peers to be the highest manifestation of social justice in their lives.

Every aspect of our evaluative methods centers the culture of the community. We ground our work in the context of their lived experiences, and we respond to their expressed needs in a way that partners with them as assets in their own uplift.

Avoiding Cultural Essentialism

At the same time that we adhere to CRE, we are committed to never romanticizing or minimizing community members' challenges. In this respect we adhere to Judith Goode's reflections about avoiding cultural essentialism.[‡]

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[*] See Dominica McBride, "Culturally Responsive Evaluation" in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation* ed. Bruce B. Frey (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 441-444.

[†] See Dominica McBride, "Culturally Responsive Evaluation."

[‡] See Judith Goode, J. "Culturalist Essentialism" in *Cultural Diversity in the United States: A Critical Reader* ed. Ida Susser and Thomas C. Patterson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 434-456.

Goode notes that, when engaging with marginalized communities, a romanticized approach often makes people reach spurious conclusions like, "They can't help it, it's their culture." Such conclusions still manifest ethnocentrism.

Rather than erring in this manner, when community members do things that harm themselves or act in a manner that negatively reflects the trauma that they have or are experiencing, we offer preventative and interventional harm reduction strategies and trauma-informed care.

Rather than avoiding discussion of community members' problematic decision-making, we counsel them as peers who are a part of their community. We acknowledge the ubiquity of everyone's mistakes while discussing pathways for accountability and transformation.

Rather than focusing only on problematic behavior (pathogens), we highlight healthy actions (salutogens). When we empower them to understand and expand their healthy actions, we give them opportunities to compare salutogens with pathogens in a way that centers their own power to care for themselves and make salutogenic decisions.[§]

Overall Outcomes of the McKim Center Project

At the end of each fiscal year (which lasts from September 1st through August 31st) we aim for youth, parents/guardians, and their families (if applicable) to demonstrate a high capacity to fulfill the following five overall outcomes:

1. Cultivate peace and nonviolence supported by community participatory mindfulness™.

2. Gain knowledge and practices for community healing (restorative justice, transformative justice, conflict transformation, de-escalation, trauma-informed care, and immersive social and emotional learning).

3. Demonstrate critical thought, strategic decision-making, and creative problem solving through academic enrichment in arts-integrated STEM (particularly life science, environmental justice, and elementary engineering).

4. Curtail involvement in violent incidents caused by their own actions (and this includes verbal, physical, and emotional violence in domestic and non-domestic situations).

5. Enhance the ability to navigate and manage violence committed towards them (including institutional violence like discrimination, inadequate housing, inaccessible healthcare, and the lack of environmental safety such as exposure to lead poisoning).

How We Realize CRE

We knock on doors (with advance preparation); follow-up on referrals; carefully observe experiences; and participate in community members' lives.

In addition to our five-day-a-week afternoon and evening out-of-school-time program, we engage with youth and families in community counseling sessions every week in-person within the four housing projects or virtually in Zoom (or by phone) to care for community members, recommend best practices as peers, and maintain or boost enrollment in our McKim Center Project.

When a youth and their parent/guardian is ready to enroll in the program, we perform careful intake with both the parents/guardians and the youth (and with their relatives if the opportunity arises) to assess their needs, learn their cultural contexts, and gain detailed, confidential HIPAA and FERPA protected information about their lived experiences and identities. This community participatory research is essential to establishing the deep relationships that enable our outcomes to be realized.[**]

Then, taking care to consider the contexts of their lived experiences and worldviews, we perform ongoing confidential case management and community counseling every week with parents and youth to support their acquisition of the knowledge and practices offered in our five-day-a-week afternoon/evening programming and our occasional weekend programming.

Quarterly throughout each fiscal year, we gather students in Talking Circles (or Talk Circles) to listen and dialogue about the impact of our outcomes. Talking Circles are a nationally recognized CRE evaluative practice analogous to focus groups, but with a consciously culturally responsive, restorative, and holistic purpose.[††]

[§] Our approach to asset-driven or salutogenic approaches draws from the following source in particular: Maurice B. Mittelmark, et al., ed. *The Handbook of Salutogenesis* (2nd edition). (Springer, 2022).

[**] While we adhere to many of the approaches from Nina Wallerstein (et al.)'s *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: Advancing Social and Health Equity* (Jossey-Bass, 2017), we intentionally omit the word "based" in our formulation of this approach because our work occurs directly *within* communities and is not just based in the community.

[††] See Martha A. Brown and Sherri Di Lallo, "Talking Circles: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Practice," *American Journal of Evaluation* 2020, 41, no. 3, 367-383.

In addition to open-ended dialogue, when gathered in Talking Circles, we give community members Chromebooks and ask them to write "Letters to the Teachers" in Google Docs with prompts that query their experience of our outcomes.

Our evaluative engagement is age-appropriate and sensitivity-aware. For example, if they do not feel comfortable writing or speaking, we give our youngest community members below the age of 10-years-old opportunities to draw their feelings or play with dolls and/or stuffed animals in a manner that creates scenarios or stories that exhibit their experiences.

We take detailed, confidential, HIPAA and FERPA protected notes that help us analyze our evaluations and write impact reports and other summations for funders and institutional partners.

Based on our community participatory research, we avoid videotaping or audiotaping community members during our evaluations because of their profound expressed distrust of interventions that use their likenesses and presences without their explicit control.

(Many community members *do* provide consent to photograph themselves for the promotion of our programming. Promotion of the programming is distinguished here from evaluation of the program. The latter carries far more sensitive demands for interpreting and respecting community members' worldviews.)

Comparative Ranking

In addition to open-ended queries about how community members are experiencing the program during Talking Circles and Letters to Teachers, four times a year (every quarter) we use our weekly community counseling sessions to ask older community members (over the age of 13) to rank their experiences.

Below are examples of some of the questions that we pose to elicit rankings, which help us gain comparative evaluative data. These questions arise from what community members say are their most important experiences as well as from our own assessments as we work with them as teachers and healers. Note that after we ask questions that elicit rankings, we follow-up with open-ended questions that prompt them to explain their rankings in their own words. We also ask them to give examples of their experiences throughout the year that typify their rankings.

- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest, how much do you feel you have gained a sense of peace? How and why did you make your ranking?

- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest, how much do you feel you gained knowledge and practices that help you mange conflicts better (or make amends, de-escalate, or forge healing)? How and why did you make your ranking?

- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest, how do you feel you are thinking critically, logically, and making better life decisions? How and why did you make your ranking?

- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the most and 1 being the least, how much do you or your family struggle with affordable housing [and when we repeat the question, we replace affordable housing with challenges like affordable and accessible healthcare, food, and water]. How and why did you make your ranking?

- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being excellent and 1 being poor, how do you or your family feel about your engagement with law enforcement [and when we repeat the question, we replace law enforcement with various other governmental agencies like the Department of Social Services, the Social Security Administration, the Department of Health, or the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.] How and why did you make your ranking?

Low or midpoint rankings are not always indicators of a lack of impact.

The reason why we ask community members to rank and explain their experiences with matters like housing, healthcare, and law enforcement is to compare and contrast the experiences that are within their control and those that are not.

Systemic disparities in housing, healthcare, and law enforcement may influence their experiences of peace as well as their ability to disseminate knowledge and practices for amending conflicts and reversing their trauma.

We make these distinctions based on careful analyses of evaluative findings in our impact reports.

Our version of Talking Circles is rooted in Indigenous and Black approaches for restorative justice and restorative practices passed down from the Lumbee Tribe within the Baltimore, MD-Cumberland, NC region. Miss tree turtle, one of our Co-Directors, learned these restorative practices from Ruth and Lonnie Revels, two Lumbee Indigenous leaders with Baltimore ties Many Baltimore Lumbee peoples (some of whom are also Black) still live on the same block of Baltimore Street where the McKim Center has sat for over 200 years in Baltimore City.

Tracking Violent Incidents

To track whether the community members are involved in violent incidents throughout the fiscal year, we dialogue with them in community counseling and case management sessions.

We then compare their experiences with local, state-level, and national reports from the news media and law enforcement.

Because of persistent problems with propaganda and misrepresentations in policing and police-aligned news media, we never accept data from the media or law enforcement as fact.

Rather, we compare a range of data in a way that centers community members' experiences while taking care to vet and verify individual responses with the help of community members who may or may not corroborate their peers' findings or information gained from the media and law enforcement.

Program Quality Standards

This poster is hung on the front doors and/or around our learning spaces so that everyone knows our standards.

We value and are in compliance with

School Age Program Quality Assessment Items for Out-of-School Time
Modeled After State Standards and Standards from the
David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

I. SAFE ENVIRONMENT	II. SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT (continued)
Emotional Safety	**Encouragement**
1. Positive emotional climate	1. Staff uses non-evaluative language
2. Lack of bias	2. Staff asks open-ended questions
Healthy Environment	**Child-Centered Space**
1. Free of health and safety hazards	1. (SA) Well defined interest area
2. Clean and sanitary	2. (SA) Sufficient materials in interest areas
3. Adequate ventilation and lighting	3. (SA) Children's work displayed
4. Comfortable temperature	4. (SA) Children select displays
Emergency Preparedness	5. (SA) Open-ended materials
1. Posted emergency procedures	6. (SA) Easily accessible materials
2. Accessible fire extinguisher	7. (SA) Thirty minutes interest-based activities
3. Visible first-aid kit	**III. INTERACTION**
4. Appropriate safety equipment	**Managing Feelings**
5. Supervised indoor entrances	1. (SA) Staff acknowledge feelings
6. Supervised access to outdoors	2. (SA) Staff asks children to explain situation
Accommodating Environment	3. (SA) Helps children respond appropriately
1. Sufficient Space	4. (SA) Children suggest solutions
2. Suitable Space	**Belonging**
3. Enough comfortable furniture	1. Opportunities for children to get to know each other
4. Flexible physical environment	2. Inclusive relationships
5. (SA) Appropriately sized furniture	3. Children identify with program
Nourishment	4. (SA) Structured small group activities
1. Available drinking water	**School-Age Leadership**
2. Plentiful food and drinks	1. (SA) Practice group process skills
3. Nutritious food and drink	2. (SA) Opportunities to help another child
II. SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT	3. (SA) Structured opportunities to lead group
Warm Welcome	**Interaction with Adults**
1.Children greeted	1. (SA) Staff at eye level
2. Staff warm and respectful	2. (SA) Staff works side by side
3. Positive staff body language	3. (SA) Staff circulates
Session Flow	4. (SA) Staff interacts positively
1. Starts and ends on time	**IV. ENGAGEMENT**
2. Materials ready	**School-Age Planning**
3. Sufficient materials	1.(SA) All children plan
4. Explains activities clearly	2. Multiple planning strategies used
5. Appropriate time for activities	3. (SA) Share plans in tangible ways
Active Engagement	**Choice**
1. Children engage with materials or ideas	1. (SA) Authentic choice
2. Children talk about activities	2. (SA) Open-ended choices
3. (SA) Children make connections	**Reflection**
Skill-Building	1. Intentional reflection
1. Learning Focus linked to activity	2. Multiple reflection strategies
2. Staff encourages children to try skills	3. Structured opportunities to provide feedback
3. Staff models skills	**Responsibility**
4. Staff breaks down tasks	1. (SA) Opportunities for routine tasks
5. Support for struggling children	2. (SA) Staff do not intervene intrusively