Recommendations for Modernizing a Culturally Grounded Substance Use Prevention Program for American Indian and Alaska Native Youth

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Abstract: *American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth use alcohol and drugs at a higher rate with earlier onset than the overall youth population in the United States. Youth interventions are needed to support the prevention and reduction of substance misuse-related issues. Connecting AI/AN children to their heritage through culturally grounded prevention programs has been shown to be more effective than programs designed for the general population. The objective of this formative evaluation was to provide community-informed updates for an existing culturally grounded substance use prevention program, The Beauty Way. This study was conducted in partnership with an AI/AN-serving community organization using key informant interviews and talking circles with community members and parents. Participants revealed the challenges and obstacles AI/AN youth face, the impact of cultural values, and activities which engage youth to prevent problematic substance use. Recommendations include the importance of 1) incorporating current challenges to behavioral health such as social media and vaping, 2) including cultural values and activities including land-based learning, and 3) creating a robust facilitator guide and hiring culturally sensitive program staff. These results generated recommendations to strengthen the cultural focus and application of The Beauty Way for AI/AN youth.*

INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of years of historical trauma, including the inhumane process of colonization, forced assimilation, and genocide, have resulted in numerous health disparities among American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs; Gone et al., 2019). These health disparities include higher mortality rates for numerous diseases and afflictions, including substance use disorder, heart disease, and suicide, resulting in an overall life expectancy of 5.5 years less than the average of the U.S. population (Indian Health Service, 2019). Substance use is a growing issue among AI/ANs as drug and alcohol use increased among adults between 2018-2019, with alcohol-use disorders rising from 1.3% in 2018 to 3.2% in 2019 and marijuana use disorder rising from 3.4% to 6.5% (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020). Alarmingly, the mortality rate for chronic liver disease and cirrhosis was 4.6 times higher in the AI/AN population than the U.S. population (Walls et al., 2020).

According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse survey from 2009-2012, lifetime prevalence for disordered use of alcohol is 39%, marijuana is 43%, and cigarettes is 29% for AI/AN adults (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2021). Early onset of substance use increases the chances of chronic use in adult years (USDHHS, 2021), and biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors influence or become risk factors as early as birth (USDHHS, 2021), indicating that early intervention is critical. Research suggests AI/AN youth use alcohol and drugs at a higher rate with an earlier onset than the overall youth population in the U.S. (Walls et al., 2020). Further, AI/AN youth who live near or on reservations have higher rates of substance use than a national sample (Swaim & Stanley, 2018). These statistics represent the need for alcohol and substance use prevention programs for AI/AN youth to decrease the likelihood of substance misuse-related issues across the lifespan.

 Youth and early childhood interventions can increase protective factors and can change overall life trajectory beyond substance use prevention (USDHHS, 2021). While evidence-based prevention practices and programs exist for substance use, they may not be effective for AI/AN youth as they must be adapted, delivered, and sustained in an effective service delivery setting (de Heer et al., 2020). That is to say, there are many factors at play when choosing a prevention program that will be effective for a specific youth population, including culturally relevant content, and consistent, reliable delivery within a service delivery setting. Connecting AI/AN youth to their

heritage through culturally grounded prevention programs are suggested to be more effective than those designed for the general population (Okamoto et al., 2014). For example, *Parenting in 2 Worlds* is a culturally adapted program that, when compared to its non-culturally-based counterpart, showed improved outcomes for AI/AN parenting practices and youth behavioral problems (Kulis et al., 2016). A culturally grounded program is built from core components informed by culturally specific values, practices, beliefs, and socio-historical perspectives (Okamoto et al., 2014). Developing a culturally grounded program is an extensive process requiring heavy community involvement; however, it is likely to result in a program compatible with the community (Okamoto et al., 2014). An example of a culturally grounded program is the *Journeys of the Circle* program, an 8-session life skills program which uses AI/AN cultural values to educate AI/AN youth on substance use, communication, decision making, and goal setting skills (Marlatt et al., 2003).

A culturally adapted program is a program that has been altered from existing evidence-based practices (EBPs) and designed for a specific population to be culturally relevant (Okamoto et al., 2014). Creating a culturally adapted program can consist of surface-structure modifications, such as language, or deep-structure adaptations, which incorporate key cultural components into the core of the program (Okamoto et al., 2014). Weaving Healthy Families is an example of a culturally adapted program. Modifications for adaptation included reducing session numbers, removing some content but retaining main themes, and adding a talking circle and AI/AN food to family dinners (McKinley & Theall, 2021). There are few culturally grounded substance use prevention programs available to AI/AN youth as these programs require extensive time and collaborative effort with the AI/AN community. Moran and Reaman (2002) identified strong community involvement as a determining factor in the effectiveness of a substance use prevention program, indicating specific tailoring to participants is a key factor. Further, the program must also be relevant and acceptable to the program recipients. The Beauty Way program is referred to as a culturally grounded program throughout this article because it is based on Indigenous values and cultural lessons. However, the curriculum is also being adapted to be more inclusive of local Indigenous cultures in modern times, so it would also be correct to call the new version a culturally adapted program. To ensure a substance use prevention program is culturally appropriate and effective, extensive community involvement and participation in its development is required and recommended.

The Beauty Way Substance Use Prevention Program

The Beauty Way curriculum was developed in 1989 by the Alcohol and Substance Abuse Prevention Curriculum Project under the Navajo Division of Education in Window Rock, AZ. It was intended to be implemented in all the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools on the Navajo Reservation and is now used in after school settings (Alcohol & Substance Abuse Prevention Curriculum Project, 1989). According to the curriculum's introduction, it was a collaboration between a team of AI/AN and non-AI/AN working professionals in education, health, social welfare, and law, to develop a culturally relevant program encouraging AI/AN youth to remain drug and alcohol-free (Alcohol & Substance Abuse Prevention Curriculum Project, 1989).

The Beauty Way is a curriculum for grades K-8 with 5-6 age-appropriate lessons in each unit which can be taught in the classroom with the teacher as the facilitator. Each lesson plan has a title with learning objectives and a section outlining the cultural background information for the facilitator to review and use as they see fit. Lessons and activities are age-appropriate with modifications made for communication and length of lesson. Cultural lessons are a core component of the program along with five prevention skills that encourage youth to develop 1) a positive self-image, 2) a positive self-identity, 3) social skills, 4) positive coping strategies, and 5) decision making skills. Each lesson can be adapted, shortened, or lengthened as needed to assist the facilitator in applying the concepts in a manner that the students can learn and internalize. Each lesson comes with supplemental materials such as activity sheets, posters, videos, and some reading materials to implement the lessons effectively. Additionally, there is a section for the parents that can be used to encourage parental involvement in their child's education through drug and alcohol education and prevention (Alcohol & Substance Abuse Prevention Curriculum Project, 1989).

In 1991, this program was evaluated in elementary schools across the Navajo Nation by Northern Arizona University's (NAU) affiliated program in the Institute for Human Development department. This process evaluation included 367 teachers and 1,793 students and utilized training feedback, curriculum feedback, classroom observation of teacher facilitators, and student perceptions regarding substance use (Schacht, 1991). This evaluation did not include an evaluation of intervention effectiveness. Overall, there was support from teachers for the prevention lessons (67%) and learning objectives offered (59%) by the curriculum (Schacht, 1991).

While this process evaluation was comprehensive, it occurred over 30 years ago, and current facilitators at a local AI/AN Community Service Agency (AI/ANCSA) voiced concern the

curriculum is outdated and may no longer be relevant or applicable to AI/AN youth in 2022 (Schacht, 1991). Specifically, information on drugs including marijuana is outdated, and the curriculum does not include new drug use behaviors that are popular with youth, like vaping. Substance use prevention has continued to develop new strategies since the curriculum's development in the 1980's. The AI/ANCSA staff wanted to include modern communication regarding youth substance use prevention. Additionally, wording in the original curriculum can be deficit-based, adheres to stereotypes about substance use in AI/AN communities, and does not include gender-inclusive language. The AI/ANCSA that implements the curriculum serves AI/AN youth from various cultural backgrounds that are not reflected in the original curriculum. Staff expressed the need for a new curriculum to address multiple cultural backgrounds and histories that exist in the state to make a more inclusive program for the AI/AN youth.

The purpose of this formative evaluation is to modernize *The Beauty Way* for AI/AN youth by engaging community members, parents, and leadership organizations. The evaluation questions are:

1. What aspects of *The Beauty Way* curriculum should be modified to be more culturally relevant, inclusive, and sensitive to AI/AN youth in urban settings according to the AI/AN community?

2. What risk and protective factors for AI/AN youth should be considered to promote well-being and cultural identity when implementing a culturally grounded substance use prevention program?

METHODS

This work provided insight into strategies and approaches to engage youth, identify current risk factors, determine cultural considerations, and foster a strong cultural identity among AI/AN youth in a city densely populated with AI/ANs. This work was supported by an existing partnership between an AI/ANCSA organization and the Institute for Translational Research Education (ITRE). Three scholars (SG, KM, and AMH) are referred to throughout this article as the "evaluation team" and engaged in this project while working toward a certificate in Adolescent Behavioral Health through ITRE. Two of these scholars identify as AI members of the community where this evaluation study occurred. The evaluation team worked with the AI/ANCSA to explore possible avenues of work that would benefit both organizations and illustrate the evaluation team's

commitment to the AI/AN community. The AI/ANCSA expressed the need to update *The Beauty Way* curriculum to be a more interactive, engaging program with modern information that is applicable to the AI/AN youth of today. As part of this project, the AI/ANCSA received a full report with specific programmatic recommendations for implementing *The Beauty Way.*

Setting: AI/AN Community Service Agency (AI/ANCSA)

To protect the identities of the AI/AN communities and identities in the area, the term AI/AN will be used throughout this paper and does not specify a specific group. Further, to protect the community and location, all identifying markers have been removed; however, this community lies in the Southwest region of the United States. This community is located on the traditional homelands of several AI/AN tribes. As of 2018, AI/AN peoples comprise 7.8% of the community population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), which is a notable density of AI/AN peoples when compared to the U.S. overall (1.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Additionally, these numbers only include individuals who described themselves as AI/AN alone, not in combination with any other races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The 2021 County Community Needs Assessment reported AI/AN adolescents have lower high school graduation rates than any other racial/ethnic group, and more than one in three AI/ANs live in poverty in the county (NACA, 2021). These statistics demonstrate a crucial need for the services the AI/ANCSA provides to the AI/AN community. The AI/ANCSA provides youth services such as a youth program that offers after-school and occasional weekend activities that promote self-esteem, educational enrichment, physical fitness, traditional activities and practices, substance use prevention, and cultural values to children in 1st through 6th grades (NACA, 2021). The organization utilizes *The Beauty Way* curriculum as part of the substance use prevention efforts which is delivered as an after-school program.

Design and Participants

The evaluation team recognized AI/AN values and experiences vary among geographical regions, neighborhoods, and individuals. Community involvement and input are necessary and ideal when developing programs for AI/AN populations, so their feedback on *The Beauty Way* curriculum was imperative to program enhancements. Due to the unique experiences of the evaluation team and the need for community participation, interviews and talking circles were identified as the best approach to explore culturally sensitive updates for *The Beauty Way* curriculum. Talking circles allowed individuals to share thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a safe

space with an equal balance of power (Di Lallo et al., 2021). As part of AI/AN history and culture, talking circles are known to AI/AN community members rather than focus groups which created a culturally sensitive approach to increase participation, engagement, and safety among the members. This approach ensured that the community recommendations for updates are culturally sensitive and community specific.

Recruitment

In November 2021, the participants were recruited via flyer at the AI/ANCSA location, on social media groups through Facebook, by phone, and from face-to-face interaction with community partners. The evaluation team also reached out to personal and professional networks to recruit for the talking circles. The team aimed to recruit 5-10 participants for each talking circle to ensure there would be enough participants to elicit in-depth conversation but not so many participants that some would not get to speak regularly (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Participants' contact information was collected and then they were assigned to one of two talking circles. AI/ANCSA employees were asked to participate in interviews. The evaluation team also scheduled two youth talking circles; however, there was a COVID-19 outbreak where the youth reside. The youth talking circles were canceled, and the youth were placed on quarantine. For safety purposes and timing of this project, youth talking circles could not be rescheduled.

Inclusion Criteria

Interviews were conducted with four AI/ANCSA employees who had direct knowledge and/or experience with the youth programs and the AI/AN population. The first talking circle was conducted with community members (ages 18+) who identify as AI/AN and reside in the community. The second talking circle included parents (ages 18+) who identify as AI/AN and reside in the community. No participants were turned away.

Procedures

The evaluation team submitted the proposed methods and recruitment strategies to Northern Arizona University's Human Research Protection Program. The formative evaluation was deemed to be evaluation and not research, so written informed consent was not collected. However, the evaluation team described the purpose of the interviews and talking circles and allowed participants to ask any questions before, during, and after the discussions.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted and recorded virtually through an online video conferencing service (Zoom) and lasted an average of 1 hour. Four interviews were conducted with individuals who had experience working with youth, behavioral health, or implementing the program. AI/ANCSA employees were presented with a copy of the third-grade unit of *The Beauty Way* curriculum to review for five minutes prior to the interview, then another copy was presented on screen during the session. The AI/ANCSA only had copies of curriculum for grades 3-6. The team chose to present the third-grade curriculum because it is first in the sequential order of curriculum that was accessible to the team. They were asked ten semi-structured questions regarding feasibility and sustainability of *The Beauty Way* program, which included questions on the challenges, barriers, and benefits of improvement. At the end of the sessions, participants were mailed a $5 gift card in exchange for their participation and input to the group.

Talking Circles

Two talking circles were conducted and recorded virtually through an online video conferencing service (Zoom) by two members of the evaluation team and lasted an average of 90 minutes. Additionally, both members of the evaluation team took notes during the talking circles to ensure key details were recorded. At the beginning of each talking circle, participants and the evaluation team engaged in introductions, provided a brief background on the project goals to build rapport among members, and presented a copy of the third-grade unit from *The Beauty Way* curriculum to review for 5-10 minutes prior to the talking circle. Another copy of *The Beauty Way* curriculum was also presented on screen during the session. Participants in the "Community Member Talking Circle" were asked eight semi-structured questions on *The Beauty Way* program, including their vision and ideas on how to make it more inclusive, while staying true to cultural values. Participants in the "Parent Talking Circle" were asked eight semi-structured questions on what keeps their children entertained and engaged and what challenges they face as AI/AN children living in an urban location. At the end of each talking circle, participants were mailed a $5 gift card in exchange for their participation and input to the group. Table 1 includes questions used to guide discussions with each stakeholder group.

Table 1
Interview and talking circle guiding questions

Data Collection Method	Questions
AI/ANCSA Staff Interviews	1. Can you describe your experience implementing/ facilitating youth programs at the AI/ANCSA? 2. What challenges did you face implementing the program? 3. What suggestions do you have to improve program implementation? 4. How did you perceive participant engagement? 5. What lessons or components, if any, of The Beauty Way do you think need to be improved/ updated? 6. In your opinion what are the core elements/values/ skills of The Beauty Way to help prevent substance abuse in Native youth in the Community? 7. How do you think The Beauty Way impacts, or will impact the participants? 8. What types of activities do the youth at the AI/ANCSA enjoy? 9. What kind of mental health issues do you see impacting Native American youth? 10. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Parent Talking Circle	1. What are your thoughts on the lesson? 2. Do you think the lesson is appropriate for your children (6–9-year-olds)? 3. Did you find the lesson relatable in terms of values/ culture? 4. What types of issues do your children struggle with in school? 5. What concerns, if any, do you have about your children regarding substance use? 6. How could this program help to address these issues? 7. What types of things are your 6–9-year-old interested in? 8. What kind of substance use issues do you see impacting Native American youth?
Community Member Talking Circle	1. What are your thoughts on the lesson? 2. Did you find the lesson relatable in terms of values/ culture? 3. What cultural components are important for youth in the Community to connect with? 4. Is there anything you would change to make this lesson more culturally relatable, if so what changes would you make? 5. What risk factors or concerns do you have for Native urban youth that should be addressed through this program? 6. What concerns regarding substance use do you have about youth in the Community? 7. What ideas do you have to make this lesson more engaging for 6–9-year-olds in the Community? 8. What kind of substance use issues do you see impacting Native American youth?

Qualitative Data Analysis

The evaluation team transcribed audio recordings and merged them with handwritten notes taken during the sessions. Qualitative analysis occurred in two phases. In phase one, the evaluation team created a codebook that corresponded with questions asked during interviews and talking circles. In phase two, the evaluation team used deductive thematic analysis to code the transcribed interviews and talking circles (Clarke et al., 2015). As part of a community-engaged approach, the evaluation team invited employees from AI/ANCSA to assist with coding data and developing ideas from program updates based on the analysis. All members of the evaluation team received training on deductive qualitative analysis before coding through the ITRE certificate program. Data from each team member was then compiled using Google Sheets. Through consensus, the team compared and discussed their individual data and identified major patterns encountered within each question and by overall thematic category.

RESULTS

This project aimed to determine culturally appropriate updates for the substance use prevention program called *The Beauty Way* for the AI/ANCSA organization. To meet this objective, the project focused on providing specific recommendations based on feedback from AI/AN-identifying members of the community. Talking circles with parents (n = 7) and community members (n = 5) were conducted to gain insight on which elements of *The Beauty Way* curriculum were essential to retain and which needed to be updated. Interviews with AI/ANCSA members who have implemented *The Beauty Way* as an after-school program or have experience with the population they serve provided some insight into the challenges and strengths of the program. All groups provided some understanding of the most important factors related to improving and tailoring a culturally grounded substance use prevention program for children in an urban setting, while engaging and fostering a connection to their cultural background, knowledge, and practices. The evaluation team identified three key themes from the qualitative analysis including local behavioral health concerns, the importance of culture, and facilitator considerations.

Table 2
Interview and talking circle participants

	N	Gender	AI/AN
Staff Interviews: AI/ANCSA staff who work with youth programs	4	Female (N=1) Male (N=3)	Yes (N=3) No (N=1)
Parent Talking Circle: Parents or guardians (ages 18+) of youth who identify as AI/AN and reside in the community	7	Female (N=5) Male (N=2)	Yes (N=7) No (N=0)
Community Talking Circle: Adults (ages 18+) who identify as AI/AN and reside in the community	5	Female (N=4) Male (N=1)	Yes (N=7) No (N=0)

Local Behavioral Health Concerns

Participants identified low self-esteem, bullying, and historical trauma as risk factors that impact AI/AN youth mental health. For example, one community parent noted, "And then bullying of course, and I think one, one of the lessons talked a little bit about bullying, but back then, I think it wasn't such a commonly used phrase as it is now." An AI/ANCSA employee identified historical trauma as another behavioral health concern: "One of the things that's fairly consistent across tribes is a concept called historical trauma, and so, based on how each particular family copes with historical trauma either in a healthy or unhealthy manner is going to affect the mental health of the kid." Participants also noted the importance of addressing behavioral health risk factors through protective factors in *The Beauty Way* curriculum. For example, one AI/ANCSA employee described the importance of cultural identity and youth having an understanding of their ancestral history to build resilience. This employee said, "Having that knowledge of who they are, what their ancestors have experienced, and all the resilience that it took to get to them specifically to the place that they're standing, I think is important." A community parent stated, "I think we've all said it before those protective factors really are the relationship to those cultural identity markers around language and practice…". These participant statements speak to the mental and behavioral health of AI/AN youth in this community and common substances used in the community. A community parent stated, "…Just some updating on some of the programming, like thinking about social media and how that plays in. Cause there, I think there has to be something with social media…And then with the tobacco

use one, I know vaping wasn't kind of popular back then, but I know it certainly is now…". Interviews conducted with AI/ANCSA employees revealed that the most accessible and commonly abused substances among children were vaping, alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and prescription drugs.

The Importance of Culture

Participants voiced how separation from their cultural practices, activities, and connection can be destructive for children especially when they are faced with stereotypes, racism, discrimination, and cultural appropriation in the schools and community. A community member stated, "…losing sight of your culture and your teachings, and just putting emphasis on that and encouraging to return home and ask questions, and participate in ceremonies. However, to make that connection a bit stronger…". A community parent echoed this need for connection and said, "…Every human has a connection to land or territory, every human has a connection to, or knowledge of history, right. And it's how you bring those together to understand that there's a relationship between all of us…". An AI/ANCSA employee described the protective nature of cultural identity as "…establishing a strong sense of identity with…with the children so that way, you know, when things start to change in their life and they start to experience adversity, they have a strong sense of who they are…".

Participants also voiced how some children may feel excluded or denied their cultural membership because of their appearance or knowledge; therefore, cultural inclusivity should be cultivated. A community parent stated, "…It does pit our students against one another sometimes when you're saying, 'Well, you're not [tribe name] enough or you're not [tribe name] enough.' It creates a circumstance where we point the finger at each other for not knowing enough or knowing too much, right." Another community parent expanded on the issue of exclusion:

> …I just want to say that it is a definitely something to consider because we have some Native American students who don't feel comfortable going to one of our Native American advisors because they don't feel Native enough. They feel maybe that they don't have an accent or they're a little bit more urban and they don't feel like because the advisor has that real strong presence of culture that they don't feel Native enough to seek out those resources and vice versa. - Community Parent

Facilitator Considerations

Participants described the importance of preparing facilitators with a guide to ensure they understand generational trauma so that they will be able to connect, communicate, and understand the challenges and struggles AI/AN children face. Several quotes (below) describe suggestions made by community parents regarding facilitators of culturally grounded curriculum.

And I mean, maybe that is for the guide for the moderator or presenter of generational trauma and how that plays in because that's obviously, we look at boarding schools, colonization, assimilation, and it's all the definitely interconnected, and just back to the point about kind of the identity continuum of our Native youth. - Community Parent

And I think that goes a long way with thinking about how you present the material that will facilitate the awareness that although we're working with students at an individual level, thinking about ways that we engaged them to consider the ways they're connected to a larger community. - Community Parent

…it's talking about relationality and being intentional with language use in terms of thinking about developing community and speaking to one another as auntie, uncle, grandfather, a niece, nephew and using that kind of terminology. I think might be something to consider as well, the facilitator and students together and how they're creating that dynamic and I think it goes back to that notion that was discussed several times. - Community Parent

Facilitators also need to be observant, know how to engage the children, and ask for feedback at the end of each lesson to ensure fidelity of the program. Facilitators should strive to be creative, build group cohesion, and accept others regardless of their cultural differences and variances. One community parent demonstrated by stating, "And then if we're implementing the language, asking questions like how is the teacher facilitating or using language to encourage self-determination? I think those are things that can be somehow integrated into the curriculum here." Another community parent said, "…So it's just acceptance that we're all in different areas and we can all learn from one another, but again, for one... in one area for the students and then the other for the Proctor to understand that there's these two different feelings going on between students."

Participants requested the incorporation of hands-on activities, cultural arts and crafts, interactive lessons, and games with an online presence on social media to engage the children of today in this substance use prevention curriculum. Some hands-on activities suggested to foster engagement include journaling, creating posters, making collages, constructing projects, and physical activities. Cultural arts and crafts identified were sheep butchering, rug weaving, fishing, and participation in traditional practices and ceremonies. Lastly, technological advancements since the creation of this program need to be incorporated, such as interactive lessons accessible through the internet or social media, to increase participation. Although interactive lessons can be incorporated into the curriculum, it is up to the facilitator to ensure they are used with enthusiasm to promote youth engagement.

DISCUSSION

This project focused on providing recommendations for updates to an AI/AN substance use prevention program called *The Beauty Way* for an AI/AN community service organization to utilize as an after-school program. Since its creation in 1989, some content in the curriculum has become irrelevant today, which has impacted participant engagement. This prompted the AI/AN organization to request modifying the program's curriculum. Using a community-engaged approach, the evaluation team and the organization set out to answer which aspects of *The Beauty Way* curriculum are essential to the program's goals, objectives, and what the current needs, interests, and best practices are when servicing the AI/AN community.

The Beauty Way curriculum content was sufficient for the times it was created; however, we identified a need for improved culturally sensitive language, inclusivity of diverse cultures and tribes, and delivery systems in the lessons. A recurring theme throughout the categories and groups was the conception that a strong cultural identity and connection was a protective factor against many mental health issues such as substance use, suicide, and depression. Second was an awareness of the differences within and among the AI/AN children in their knowledge of traditional beliefs or practices, use and understanding of cultural language, and connection with their elders or ancestral homeland. This aligns with the findings of a systematic mixed methods review which identified a connection with an adult role model who instills positive aspirations and cultural identity as one of the strongest protective factors for AI/AN youth against substance use (Woods, et al., 2022).

Another area was the acknowledgment of historical/intergenerational trauma and its impact on mental health, loss of language, and a continual separation from culture. Participants described the need for inclusion, tolerance, and acceptance among AI/AN children from their peers, parents, and community. These findings are related to cultural identity or connection at a higher level and the lack of this relationship can result in mental health issues, substance use/abuse, and the continuation of a vicious cycle, a fact that has been confirmed by Indigenous scholars and recent studies (Ullrich, 2019). *The Beauty Way* curriculum serves a vital purpose in substance use prevention, perhaps more so now than when it was first developed given the high rates of substance use and continued attempts of cultural erasure.

Participants were clear on the importance of utilizing a facilitator's guide to understand the values, demographics, beliefs, and experiences of the AI/AN community to grasp a better understanding of this population. This guide can provide some assistance in creating a safe, secure, and accepting environment for the children and aid in building group cohesion. Further, a structured environment for the children can serve as a support system, similar to an extended clanship of family system for them as their families may be struggling with cultural disconnection. With this support system in place, AI/AN children can learn healthy coping skills and build resiliency, self-sufficiency, and self-confidence that will help them as they grow into young adults. This is consistent with Indigenous knowledge and worldviews that emphasize the importance of community and intergenerational connection as a form of health (O'Keefe et al., 2022).

The Beauty Way curriculum has the potential to build an alliance with peers, families, community, and ancestral homelands to increase resiliency, self-esteem, cultural identity, and awareness because they can serve as protective factors against children's substance use. This program can encourage AI/AN children to have stronger cultural identities and foster healthier attitudes toward substance use by ultimately decreasing substance abuse among children. By sharing traditional AI/AN teachings and wisdom with children through this program, it may not only increase cultural identification, but help to preserve AI/AN traditions and values.

Implications

Since this project was guided by the AI/ANCSA's needs, it is expected to benefit the organization through improved delivery services and implementation of a substance use prevention program to the AI/AN community, specifically among children. The youth program's coordinator indicated that while these programs are available only to AI/AN youth it can impact their families

by sparking meaningful conversations around culture with their immediate and extended family members. It is anticipated the updated *The Beauty Way* curriculum continues to foster this cultural connection and/or identity to enhance cultural knowledge among children and their families. This project provides a deepened understanding of the challenges for the AI/AN community in this southwestern town which can then guide future research and implementation decisions within the AI/ANCSA organization.

On a macro-level, this project may also inform the process of making community-specific adaptations and updating outdated culturally grounded youth prevention programs in other regions. Published findings can assist other organizations in improving their programs, practices, or policies in AI/AN communities in other locations (Brownson et al., 2018). It will also add to the existing body of literature on adaptations of culturally grounded prevention programs among AI/AN communities.

Strengths and Limitations

This work had many strengths, including the community-engaged approach. All interviewees and talking circle participants are members of the community and all but one are AI. This project included an evaluation team that includes 2 AI scholars who are also from the community. The team worked closely with the AI/ANCSA staff throughout the duration of the project, and this partnership will continue for years to come. As with any evaluation study, there are limitations to this service-learning project. First, there was changing input from the AI/ANCSA organization due to staff turnover after the longtime coordinator resigned from the position, leaving a vacancy. In addition, the talking circle and AI/ANCSA interview participants may not be representative of the AI/AN community as most of them have advanced degrees and work in professional fields. This limitation, perhaps caused by sampling bias, may impact results because Indigenous children of parents and community members with advanced degrees may not experience the same challenges as their Indigenous counterparts who do not hold advanced degrees or work in professional fields. However, that does not necessarily mean that our participants are out of touch with the Indigenous community challenges and strengths therein.

Lastly, the impact of the COVID pandemic presented some challenges to meet the participants in person. AI/ANs had 3.5 times more positive COVID cases than non-Hispanic Whites and were one of the groups with a higher risk from the disease (CDC, 2020). For this reason, the AI/ANCSA and the evaluation team decided to conduct the talking circles and

interviews remotely through an online video conferencing service. Even with the relatively low number of total respondents, the evaluation team obtained a rich description of the program, its value to the community, and potential ways to improve it. Additionally, participants were engaged, and the evaluation team was able to obtain perspectives from several respondents including staff, parents, and community members. Unfortunately, COVID prevented the team from scheduling a youth talking circle. Future work with the AI/ANCSA will include youth input and pilot program feedback.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Future steps should include incorporating these recommendations into *The Beauty Way* curriculum and then evaluating the program's effectiveness and implementation. The authors provided the AI/ANCSA partners with a report including all findings and recommendations. Recommendations can be found in Table 3. It is also recommended that subsequent work continue to evaluate the acceptability, feasibility, fidelity, and the shift of attitudes towards substance use among participants of the updated curriculum. Continued partnership with the ITRE program and scholars could provide continued in-depth evaluation of the program development process and implementation. Based on the results of those evaluations, further modifications may need to be completed to continually improve the curriculum using similar methods and strategies.

Table 3
Recommendations

Recommendations for Curriculum	Recommendations for Staff
- Adopt culturally sensitive and gender inclusive language - Include the use of technology and interactive activities in curriculum - Consider the wide spectrum of cultural background and connectedness - Promote intergenerational engagement by including Indigenous guest speakers of all ages and cultural backgrounds - Promote family connectedness by encouraging at-home cultural conversations	- Focus on inclusivity and measures to promote cultural awareness and prevent bullying - Acknowledge historical and inter-generational trauma and its impact on values, loss of language, and separation from culture - Develop community between peers and staff through language and kinship - Develop a comprehensive facilitator's guide for future program coordinators - Ask for youth feedback on a regular basis

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a culturally grounded substance use prevention program such as *The Beauty Way* curriculum appears vital to reducing substance abuse among AI/AN children. The AI/ANCSA partners viewed a timely updating of the curriculum as important for the continued relevance and effectiveness of the program. These programs can provide an understanding of cultural teachings and knowledge, create a sense of connection to immediate family and extended family, and foster a strong AI/AN identity, which may be protective factors against future substance abuse. With a high rate of substance use that contributes to mental health issues among AI/AN communities, it is essential for these programs to be implemented and sustained with fidelity by agencies like AI/ANCSA. Local agencies such as AI/ANCSA are motivated by their mission and vision statements to provide the best services to AI/AN communities which ensures the continual support and development of strong, independent, and culturally knowledgeable children. Further, this substance use prevention program can be a sustainable and effective program for many generations to come which could improve behavioral health among AI/AN children in this southwestern town.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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