

Indigenous Textiles Collective: a collaborative assessment



Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

In partnership with: American Indian Community House, Red de Pueblos Transnacionales, Endangered Language Alliance

RECOMMENDATIONS

- * Continue and increase FY2020 funding
- * Improve access to workshops by offering classes more frequently and in more neighborhoods
- * Resolve identified structural and financial barriers to transform workshops into a community-sustained activity (e.g., provision of workspace and start-up funds rather than a reimbursement system)
- * Plan a formal evaluation for next year with Division of Epidemiology

Culturally-driven Participatory Education Empowers Learners

Key goals of the Indigenous Textiles workshop included community strengthening and skill-building. According to our June 2019 internal evaluation, these goals were met and were exceeded in unexpected ways.

- 2 Greater connection and personal agency through participation.
- 2 Generational and cultural connection, connection with their family units and reduced social isolation.
- 2 Greater sense of wellbeing, with economic empowerment.

Unexpected benefits:

- 2 Discussion of challenges and identification of personal and group acts of solidarity.



Collectively envisioning a future and engaging in relationships (demonstrated for many Indigenous peoples as "tribe") is the

The Story of the Collective

New York City has the largest urban population of Indigenous peoples from across the Americas in the United States. Despite this fact, very little is known about the Indigenous communities that make New York City their home. Since 2017 the Division of Family and Child Health (FCH) has been partnering with non-profit and grassroots organization, to co-create projects that through quantitative and qualitative research are leading to greater understanding of the priorities and concerns of Indigenous communities.

From our collaborative research with Indigenous community members we have learned, for example, that Indigenous/ Native peoples of the Americas in NYC are discriminated in local laws and policies designated to address inequities (e.g., the Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprise (M/WBE) Program, interpretation services known as language access policies).

Indigenous/Native peoples of the Americas in NYC are not recognized as a minority in the M/WBE Program and speak languages which less than 1% of population in NYC speaks. Omissions in our laws and policies perpetuate the invisibility

that our partners have expressed.

The three main community-based projects that FCH supported in fiscal year 2019 have been centered on the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples, specifically related to language, food, and textiles. This brief report is based on the textiles project.

The goals of the project were to strengthen cohesion among the Indigenous peoples, to share and learn new skills and to potentially develop a new source of income from their creations.

Particular emphasis was placed on intentions of shifting norms in the textile industry away from "Native-inspired" to "Native-made" products.

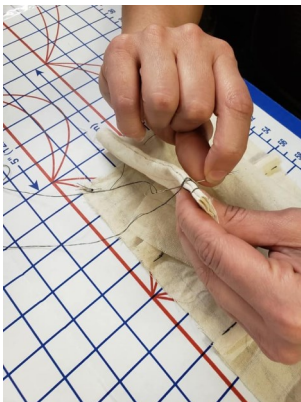
The Textiles Collective builds on the work of Mohawk fashion artist Iako:wihe'ne Oakes, who has guided the launching of the project from March - June 2019. In the workshops, 15-20 families of the Red de Pueblos Transnacionales, who are all migrants from Mexico, met every other Saturday at the East Harlem Neighborhood Health Action Center. Workshops have consisted of jewelry-making with beads, making moccasins, and designing

and creating bags.

The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has supported the Textiles workshops by providing: space at the East Harlem Neighborhood Health Action Center, pay for the instructor and coordinators, materials and equipment, food, and incentives for each of the nine committees making up the Red de Pueblos Transnacionales, liability insurance, Metro-cards, and toys and art supplies for children, for a yearly investment of \$30,000.

An internal quality assessment was conducted in June 2019 to determine the qualitative impact of the workshops on the participants and to identify areas of the workshop that could be improved. A voluntary focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with 6 workshop participants to evaluate their growth in skills and personal agency, changes in their social connectivity, and feelings on participation,

The transcript of the FGD was analyzed for themes related to the goals of the project; additional themes related to power and self-efficacy were surfaced and are also included in the results (see Page 2).



Generational and Cultural Connection

“[We are] honoring our artisans who are there in Mexico; learning what they have taught us for generations, and also, to be able to pass them to the new generations...”

-FGD participant

Primary aims of the textiles workshop are to foster social cohesion and increase cultural awareness through learning of Indigenous craftsmanship.

All participants agreed that the workshops created more cultural awareness, where one participant ties this to her own community environment: “we come to learn, to contribute to the community because this is not only for us Mexicans. We are willing to share what we know with other communities as well, as the teacher shared with us her traditions...” All respondents agreed that they plan to share their learnings with

their community and to contribute more to their community than they did before the workshops.

Entire families, including children, attend the workshops together, so parents can learn and engage in the classroom setting. Participants indicate the importance of these practices as they express increased feelings of inclusion and ease: “It is a place where we have a lot of inclusion because children have a place to play and that makes us feel at ease.” Social isolation remains a powerful determinant of well-being; participants have shown isolation can

be remediated through the hands-on group setting, which doesn't require fluency in the language of instruction.



“Being here is like therapy; I de-stress and forget about my worries. I rest here, share, and interact with others. I am doing things I haven't done since I was a girl. I like [the workshops] a lot.”

-FGD Participant

Finding Power Within

A benefit workshop participants reported was the increased awareness and desire for change at an individual level, or “power within.” This is an important aspect of agency (the ability to act on behalf of your values (Malhotra, 2001)) and can be viewed through the lenses of economic empowerment and well-being.

Participants identified a desire for economic opportunities and indicated that they

plan to use the skills learned in the workshops to make money. Given that participants often remain engaged with the program over multiple workshop cycles, attainment of economic success as a result of their new skills will be evaluated in the following cycles.

Further, multiple well-being benefits were described by the participants. Feelings of confidence and happiness were commonly

discussed as well as reductions in stress. Despite the length of time commuting to the workshops (some 90 minutes or more) and the inconvenience of the class schedule (working nights preceding the class), attendance is nearly 100% at each of the sessions; one participant indicated: “this is the only day during the week that is for me.”

“We do not want to be oppressed and without a name... with this knowledge, we will be empowered immigrants...”

-FGD Participant

Stirring Economic and Political Empowerment

In addition to general well-being, participants uniformly agreed that the information they learned in the workshop gave them information they needed to make decisions about their lives, which is an important indicator of an individual's perception of their own power- the power and control over personal decisions (“power over”). Exercising agency in the context of social constraints and hierarchy is a fundamental path to empowerment. Empowerment expands on personal agency by including an environment where people can exert their agency fruitfully. In this

way, participants surfaced conditions of their environment and how that fits with the growing sense of agency they experienced (“power within”). Two themes related to the idea of “power over” were economic and political.

Addressing economic constraints, a participant shared a vision for her economic empowerment: “if we make our garments [we are] going to have less clothing waste... and, instead of the very famous designers [who] continue to get richer, we can make our own garments and... contribute to the

planet...” Another participant went on to describe exploitative practices in the labor market: “Truly the jobs are an exploitation... sometimes when I see people walking by their dog in the stroller, I say 'oh, I want to be a dog' because... they live better than you.”

Finding community to discuss shared challenges, to gather information and skills, and to identify personal and group acts of solidarity for changing household, community, and macro-level constraints are key outcomes of the workshops.

Next Steps

② Expansion of the neighborhoods and class times are important for growth and to increase the sustainability of the collective activities. To maximize the impact and reach of the Textiles Collective, additional funding will be required to scale up activities and implement additional workshop modules: gender norms, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and access to financial and educational institutions.

② A formal evaluation of economic attainment, improvements to well-being, and cultural, legal and political empowerment will be conducted. Community-based participatory research methodology will be used to include participants in the planning, conduct, and assessment of a comprehensive evaluation.

② Additional evaluation themes will include changes in social cohesion;

access to markets for workshop-related income-generating activities and institutional financial inclusion; knowledge of cultural, political and political processes, especially for those participants that attend both the textile workshops and the sister workshops on “Culture: our traditions, our rights.” These workshops, also run by the Red de Pueblos Transnacionales, focus on human rights, leadership and community organizing; and awareness of justice systems.