

Culturally Responsive Evaluators on the Ground: A Case Study of Child360

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Conducting Culturally Responsive Evaluation to Produce Meaningful Social Change

In recent years, the field of evaluation has recognized the importance of integrating culturally responsive evaluation (CRE)¹ approaches (Boyce & Chouinard, 2017; Hopson, 2009). The call to incorporate CRE approaches in the evaluation field is bolstered by our socio-historical context. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated racial and economic injustices and highlighted the growing inequality in the United States, and social issues including police brutality, food insecurity, and homelessness have become more personally relevant to many Americans. In an effort to address existing inequalities, evaluators must recognize the situated realities of their community members. CRE is one tool evaluators can leverage to produce equitable research that creates meaningful change.

Unlike more traditional evaluation frameworks that do not intentionally address culture, CRE is a context- and culture-driven approach that not only acknowledges the evaluator's and the evaluation participant's cultures, but also responds to the cultural conditions of the participants, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, in an attempt to bring equity and justice to their communities (Hood et al., 2015). Although CRE frameworks are useful theoretical references, an understanding of CRE frameworks *on the ground*, that is, *how* evaluators cultivate culturally responsive approaches and *what* these look like in evaluators' ongoing work, helps to translate theory to practice. Understanding the mapping of CRE on the ground is important for two reasons. First, exploring the application of CRE can strengthen theoretical frameworks by supporting them with empirical data about their use in practical settings. Second, studying practical applications of CRE provides a blueprint to yield successful evaluations. Creating awareness of strengths and gaps in CRE practices helps to integrate CRE approaches comprehensively into all evaluations.

The purpose of this report is to explore the relationship between two fundamental CRE frameworks – the Integral Evaluator model and the Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework– and their practical application by Child360 evaluators. Child360's Research and Evaluation department supports the improvement of existing programs and the development of new programs through program evaluation, developmental evaluation, and research studies; fulfills funder reporting requirements; and supports data use for decision-making within and outside of Child360. As a 2020-21 American Evaluation Association Graduate Education Diversity Intern (GEDI), I was asked to evaluate CRE practices of Child360 evaluators, including myself. This report outlines key findings and recommendations for cultivating CRE among evaluators.

Child360 Research & Evaluation Department

Child360 is a leading nonprofit working toward a future where every child has the educational opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. During COVID-19, Child360 transitioned to a virtual work environment, and they continued to support ongoing initiatives as schools also transitioned to virtual settings. The transition to an exclusively virtual environment, paired with the political and social unrest of 2020-21, increased the necessity for Child360 evaluators to be critically attuned to the needs of community members.

I joined Child360's Research and Evaluation department in 2020-21 through the Graduate Education Diversity Internship program of the American Evaluation Association. At the time, the department was composed of highly trained and experienced researchers with graduate degrees in education, psychology, sociology, child development, and other social sciences. The research and evaluation team included Latinx and bilingual evaluators (for details about the team members, see <https://child360.org/research>).

Methods

Three methodological tools were used to understand *how* evaluators cultivate culturally responsive approaches and *what* this looks like in practice (see Appendix A for more details). First, a case study approach was used to gain an in-depth exploration of applications and practices of CRE at Child360 (Crowe et al., 2011). Second, four interviews with six Child360 evaluators were conducted in the 2020-21 year. I

1 The terms Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation (CREE) and Anti-Racist Evaluation are also used in the field, to more specifically point to the need to include advocacy in all phases of the evaluation process, in order to enable the shifting of power to those who are most impacted.

applied the CRE framework in the research process by working with the department director to craft interview questions that spoke to the sociocultural context of Child360. Interview questions included topics such as meaning-making, research philosophy, assumptions, and the integration of CRE (see Appendix B). Third, self-reflection and ethnographic observations were used to explore how I and other evaluators engaged in CRE. Observations were drawn from weekly meetings with Child360 project evaluators, department meetings, and meetings with program partners and stakeholders. The combination of the case study approach, semi-structured interviews, and autoethnographic observations allowed for triangulation in my analysis. I transcribed interviews and personal observations and used Dedoose, a qualitative software, to identify emergent themes. The following sections summarize how Child360 evaluators implemented the Integral Evaluator model and the Culturally Responsive Framework.

Key Findings

The Integral Evaluator (IE) model offers a reflective practice to foster self and social empathy: *Self-to-Self Looking Inward, Self-to-Self Looking Outward, Self-to-Others, and Self-to-Systems* (Symonette, 2015). The IE model is the first step to truly offer helpful-help that is culturally relevant.

Evaluators are powerful social agents that hold the power to generate recommendations that may challenge or reproduce social inequalities. This social responsibility requires that evaluators navigate their privileged role in ways that are ethical. Despite calls for CRE, in practice many evaluations fall short of these aspirations (Symonette et al., 2021). The IE model is a micro/macro framework that encourages evaluators to constantly reflect on their research practices to “enhance ethical praxis and interpersonal validity” (Symonette et al., 2021). When evaluators engage in self-reflection practices, they can begin to address power imbalances (Symonette, 2008). The IE model is a crucial component of culturally relevant work. The following findings are those which emerged as most prominent in my comparison between the IE model and the R&E team data.

Child360 evaluators cultivated the self to foster empathy-grounded approaches. Engaging in CRE practices requires acute attention to the self. Culturally responsive values call for empathy-grounded evaluators who reflect on the relationship between the social positioning of evaluators and stakeholders. Child360 evaluators demonstrated the cultivation of self in two dimensions of the IE model: *self-to-self looking inward* and *self-to-other* (Figure 1). The *self-to-self looking inward* quadrant of the model asks evaluators to reflect on who they are by answering questions about their values, purpose, and attributes (e.g., *Who am I? What is my vision of who I am becoming? What does my life journey prepare and lead me to value?*). *Self-to-other* prompts evaluators to think about how they perceive others’ reception of them in the evaluation context. The following two sections detail these two findings.

Child360 evaluators cultivated self-awareness by identifying themselves as agents of social change. The IE model invites evaluators to reflect *self-to-self looking inward* on their values, social positions, and who they are. Child360 evaluators looked inward by expressing a clear vision of who they were and who they intended to serve through research. Child360 evaluators were motivated to produce research that generated social change. They championed the need to produce timely, relevant, and useful research for stakeholders, and emphasized the opportunity that evaluation offers to impact the social world, by drawing comparisons to traditional academic research. Child360 evaluators remarked that their processes allowed them to produce rigorous research that was timely and had the potential to impact stakeholders directly, unlike academic research, which can take years to publish and is often theoretically driven. Child360 evaluators entered the field because they felt passionately about research as a social justice tool.

“Evaluation is just more accessible than traditional academic research. I think that it gives you the flexibility to communicate how programs are, how they support communities...I think that gives you a lot more flexibility and freedom to make research findings more accessible to people in programs.”

“Once I start working with a program, one of my first questions is, what are you going to do with it? How will you use it and what can I give you that will help you to use it...because otherwise evaluation as an exercise, it's pointless to me.”

Not only did Child360 evaluators have a clear understanding of their values and motivations, but they also embedded CRE tenets in their research philosophy. The motivations expressed by Child360 evaluators above are aligned with CRE in two key ways. First, Child360 evaluators value engaging stakeholders to maximize the use of evaluation. Second, Child360 evaluators are invested in wide dissemination of findings to reach multiple communities. Given that CRE calls for empathy-grounded and reflexive evaluators, the first step in the successful practice of CRE is to engage the IE model to foster self-awareness.

Child360 evaluators cultivated social awareness by demonstrating thoughtful reflection on their social identities, and on how these are received and/or interpreted by others. The IE model also prompts evaluators to reflect on how others perceive them in the evaluation context. Examples of questions in the *self-to-other* quadrant are *What is the sociocultural/relational context calling for from me? How do I perceive others as perceiving/receiving me showing up in a world of many We's and They's?* Child360 evaluators demonstrated thoughtful awareness of their social identities and how these are received and/or interpreted by others. This was particularly true for evaluators of color. Evaluators of color sought to leverage their social identities and uplift the communities they represented in a field historically dominated by white evaluators. The following excerpts highlight Child360 evaluators' keen social awareness.

"I think that first I want to respond through my heart, with my heart, and I think being a woman of color, as a Latina evaluator, I feel like I have the responsibility and also the privilege to be able to bring in the lens that's different, that's culturally relevant, that, you know, lifts up a positive narrative of the communities that live in...I feel like I have that responsibility and privilege to bring in that lens that historically has been different in the field of evaluation..."

"To me, it's like uplifting, getting to know people's different cultures and understanding that everyone exists within...I try to carry that forward, and also when I analyze I try to kind of see what are some things that we can uplift, like maybe it's not what the majority said, but what are some issues that you know, are still being surfaced."

Evaluators of color were aware of the social locations they occupied in the research field. They recognized that the field of evaluation is historically white, and that as evaluators of color, they would have to navigate the implications of this fact. Furthermore, they expressed feeling a moral obligation and responsibility to advocate for historically disenfranchised communities. Though evaluators of color were introspective regarding their values and social identities, their contributions were not always validated in the field. For instance, evaluators noted feeling burdened to take on unpaid emotional labor in order to foster equitable environments. Other evaluators expressed feeling like they have to constantly prove themselves to be seen as credible researchers. Child360 evaluators practiced social awareness to advocate for the incorporation of innovative and culturally responsive methodologies. Such was the case for a team of evaluators who engaged in participatory research.

"Overall, at least in my experience, people are welcoming of different methodologies that bring a different cultural lens and maybe because in the agencies that we worked with, you know, there is a focus in relevancy and embedding those practices. So that's part of like those competencies that people want to see. But I have to say that recently like when [we] brought in the ripple effect mapping methodology, there was hesitation at first. We met them and explained to them this methodology and that this was a credible research method...That really gets to another point, like when you are an evaluator of color, you always have to work on proving yourself even more."

The self- and social awareness of Child360 evaluators was also reflected at the organizational level. In response to the political unrest of 2020, Child360 evaluators organized a book club to nurture an environment where conversations about racial injustice were ongoing. For example, one of the readings was *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. Evaluators brainstormed a list of books and facilitated meetings periodically to discuss observations, learnings, and reactions. The book club had only one rule: be as empathetic as possible with team members. The book club was another way Child360 evaluators exercised self- and social awareness.

Overall, Child360 evaluators fostered self- and social empathy by reflecting on their positionality and how these social identities are integrated in evaluator sociocultural contexts. Evaluators practiced *self-to-self looking inward* by reflecting on who they were and answering questions of their motivations in the field. Evaluators practiced *self-to-self looking outward* by reflecting on what identities and values they bring into the career context.

Figure 1. Child360 Evaluators through the Integral Evaluator Model Quadrants

		Interior Environment	Exterior Environment
Individual Self-Empathy	Self-to-Self Inward	Child360 evaluators were... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Motivated to produce research that generated social change ✓ Passionate about research as a social justice tool ✓ Championing the need to produce timely, relevant, and useful research for stakeholders 	Self-to-Self Outward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No evidence emerged related to... ✗ Determining what the evaluation agenda is calling for ✗ Reflecting on how the evaluator was showing up in the evaluation context and related tasks
Collective Social Empathy	Self-to-Others	Child360 evaluators of color... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sought to leverage their social identities and uplift their communities ✓ Demonstrated awareness of social locations they occupied in a field historically dominated by white evaluators ✓ Were introspective about their social identities and moments of (in)validation 	Self-to-Systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No evidence emerged related to... ✗ Evaluator engagement with the collective intentions and diverse sociocultural orientations in ways that impact the evaluation agenda ✗ Identifying for who and with whose rhythms the evaluation system is congruent

Child360 evaluators applied Culturally Responsive Evaluation to three steps of the research process. Generally, the goal of culturally responsive evaluators is to illuminate social injustices, promote reflexivity, embrace a strength-based approach, question assumptions, and promote actions to address inequities (Boyce & Chouinard, 2017). CRE rejects the notion that unbiased evaluations must be objective and culture-free if they are to be valid. Instead, CRE centers the culture of the evaluation participants. Under CRE, evaluators honor the cultural context by highlighting the lived experiences of community members. The increasing demand to incorporate CRE approaches in the evaluation process warrants a deeper understanding of how this work can be carried out. The Culturally Responsive Framework outlines nine ways culturally responsive lenses can be applied to the research process (Frierson et al., 2002, 2010; Hood et al., 2015).

Child360 evaluators implemented CRE in three steps of the research process (Figure 2). First, in *engaging stakeholders*, evaluators advocated for methodologies that increased stakeholder participation. Second, in *designing the evaluation*, evaluators created instruments that were relevant to specific cultural groups. Third, in *preparing for the evaluation*, evaluators trained the research team appropriately, so they could interpret what they heard and saw in the field.

Child360 evaluators pushed for methodological innovation as a means of increasing stakeholder participation. For example, two research evaluators drew from Empowerment and Systems Change frameworks to center their evaluation on the needs of community members. To achieve this goal, these evaluators advocated for ripple effect mapping as a methodological tool. Ripple effect mapping involved bringing community members together to work on identifying community needs and developing critical lenses to empower community members to create change. When asked about how their values were reflected in the frameworks used, one evaluator said the following:

"Oftentimes we push for more participatory methods that are not necessarily just surveys...So I think it's always thinking about how we diversify the voices we want to represent."

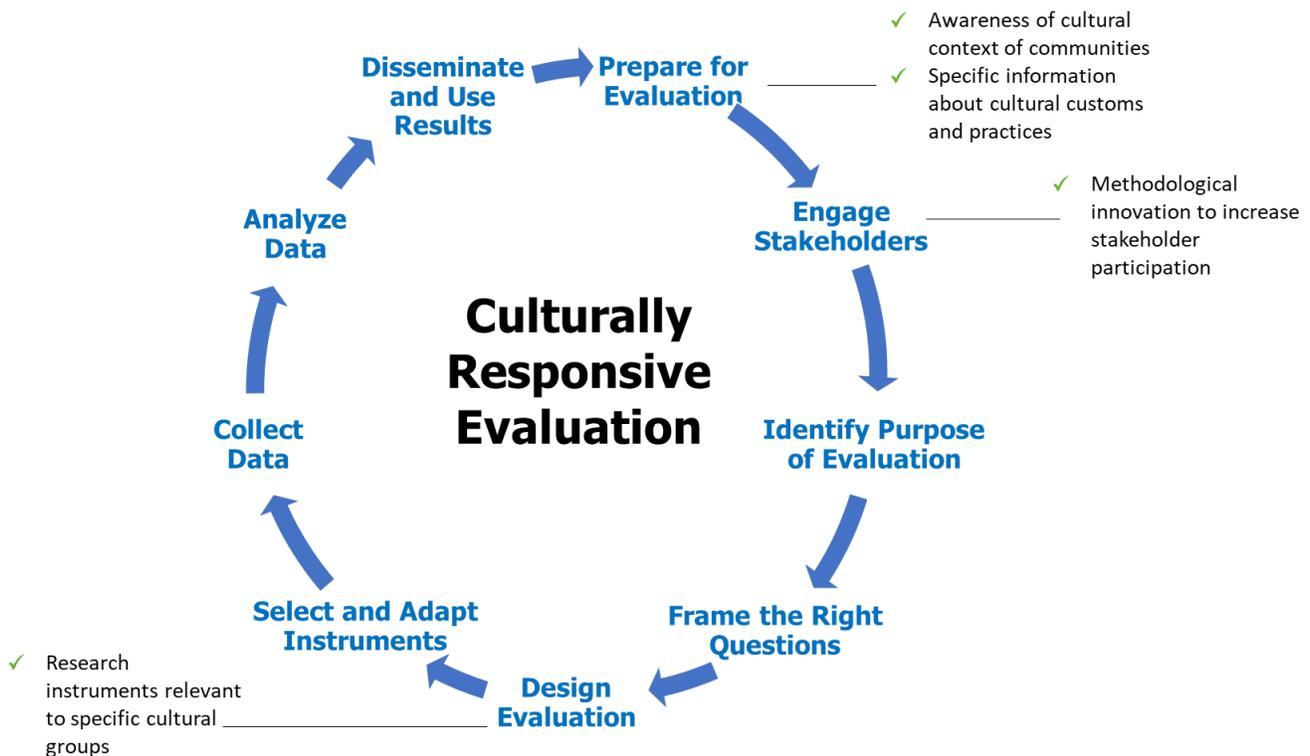
Child360 evaluators invested in expanding their methodological toolkit to center around culturally responsive approaches. For example, a team of evaluators highly encouraged participatory methodologies and developed *Cafecito con datos* meetings to engage community members with data. Child360 evaluators also thoughtfully crafted research instruments that were relevant to specific cultural groups. For instance, multiple evaluators shared that language accessibility was at the forefront of their work. Given that Child360 is located in Los Angeles with a diverse population, evaluators ensured that all materials were accessible to community members in multiple languages. Evaluators reflected the following:

"Asking for feedback and receiving that feedback from the people that are being evaluated here that you're working with. Making sure that materials are accessible, whether that's in different languages or pictures..."

"Culturally responsive even when we look at language, when we look at how we're providing, how things are worded. For example, translating things Spanish to English, making sure that it's in the language folks understand... like when we translate from English to Spanish, for example, some of the things may not make sense in Spanish, and so making sure the translation is appropriate."

Beyond culturally appropriate translations, evaluators pointed to the importance of training staff to be aware of the cultural context of communities. This often involved providing additional information about cultural customs and practices. The proper training of staff was important to Child360 evaluators to help ensure that that researchers were responsive and respectful to communities.

Figure 2. Examples of Child360's Implementation of CRE in Three Steps of the Research Process



Conclusions and Recommendations

As the field of evaluation increasingly encourages the integration of culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) approaches, clearer understandings and examples are needed of how CRE is used in practical settings. The findings of this study demonstrated that engaging in CRE requires invested evaluators who acknowledge the contributions of CRE and who seek to build equitable futures. The data shows how Child360 evaluators

engaged in the IE and the Nine Steps of Culturally Relevant Evaluation models. Child360 fostered reflexivity in two quadrants of the IE model: self-self-inward and self-self-others. There was no evidence of the self-self-outward and self-systems quadrants, perhaps because there were few opportunities to observe evaluators engaging with outside teams or organizations. Child360 evaluators incorporated CRE in three stages of the research process: stakeholder engagement, research design, and research preparation. The application of CRE to the remaining six steps of the research process was not evident. One possible explanation for this is that I did not get to observe evaluations from beginning to end. Thus, further research is needed to assess how CRE is incorporated in other areas of the research process.

The purpose of this report was to bridge CRE frameworks and their application. We hope that the findings in this report provide a roadmap for those seeking to engage in culturally responsive evaluation. Based on the findings of this study, to continue on the path of nurturing culturally responsive environments, we offer the following recommendations for Child360 and any evaluator seeking to implement CRE:

- 1. Continue to foster spaces of self-reflection and encourage evaluators to take the perspective of their research participants.** One way to achieve this is through completing a *looking glass* exercise that invites evaluators to reflect on their motivations and values and how they are perceived by others. Another way to promote self-reflection is to keep *reflexivity journals*, in which evaluators document reflections about an evaluation project with an acute focus on the self. Child360 evaluators could use a cultural diversity and cultural competency self-assessment checklist to determine the degree to which their current work incorporates CRE and how they can center CRE in future work.²
- 2. Provide additional structured opportunities for evaluators to learn about innovative CRE methodologies.** Child360 evaluators should continue to attend conferences like the one offered by the International CREA conference (<https://crea.education.illinois.edu/>). Learning from conferences should be disseminated among team members to maximize impact. Another way to learn about CRE methodologies is through resources such as books. Child360's book club could read *Culturally Responsive Methodologies from the Margins* by Beeryman et al. (2000).
- 3. Engage in conversations about how to apply CRE in the research planning process and other phases.** While this study found evidence of evaluators' consideration of CRE during planning, such practices were not consistent across projects. Further, the study did not find evidence of use of CRE practices in several phases of the research process. Consistent and structured processes would allow evaluators to be more intentional about practicing CRE on the ground. The Research and Evaluation department could standardize the practice of asking how CRE can be incorporated in evaluation projects, perhaps by creating a checklist to help center CRE in the research process.

In general, CRE evaluators should reflect on their motivations for being in the field of evaluation. It is important to determine the motivations behind the work of evaluators because these will shape how the work is carried out. CRE evaluators should continuously reflect on their social identities and how these are received in the contexts that they navigate. Being aware of one's social identity and its interpretation by others helps to foster empathy towards stakeholders. Finally, CRE evaluators should dedicate time and energy to engage in methodologies that honor the voices of communities. This dedication should also translate to the careful training of research teams.

Personal communication with the Child360 Director of Research and Evaluation revealed that after my data collection, the department participated in more structured and intentional opportunities for team members to build their CRE practice. For example, the team learned about and discussed resources from Expanding the Bench, an initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to increase diversity in the field of evaluation. They attended the inaugural Advanced Methods Institute offered by the Ohio State University to develop culturally responsive research and researchers. The team also participated in training sessions on topics such as the history of racism in research, power dynamics in evaluation, equitable principles across all phases of evaluation, and how to lead courageous conversations. Among these sessions were anti-racism training webinars hosted by Researchers Investigating Sociocultural Equity and Race (RISER) and by the Society for Research on Child Development. How the team's knowledge that they acquired through these focused opportunities translates into their practice remains a question for future study.

2. For an example of a self-assessment checklist, see: http://jordaninstituteforfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Self-Assessment_6-pages.pdf

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Appendix A. Methods

Case Study Approach

The case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of applications and practices of CRE. The case study approach lends itself well to capturing information on the more explanatory “how” questions (Crowe et al., 2011). A case study of Child360 evaluators helps to explain, describe, and explore CRE in the everyday context in which they occur. Child360’s Research and Evaluation department makes for a rich case study because of its unique composition. First, all members hold advanced degrees. Second, more than half of the members identify as Latina women. Child360’s multi-ethnic team makes it a unique place to study how CRE is applied and practiced.

This case study approach was twofold. I conducted four 60-minute interviews with six evaluators spearheading four different projects, and I also used self-reflection coupled with ethnographic observations to explore how I and other evaluators engaged in CRE. Throughout the 2020-21 year, I participated in American Evaluation Association Graduate Education Diversity Internship (GEDI) workshops to cultivate culturally responsive practices. I drew my observations from the weekly meeting with Child360 project evaluators, department meetings, and meeting with program partners/stakeholders. I kept notes on my reactions and interpretations of the meetings I participated in. Interviews and ethnographic observations were analyzed in Dedoose, a qualitative software.

Interviews

Four interviews with six Child360 evaluators were conducted in the 2020-21 year. I worked with the department director, Rosa Valdés, to craft interview questions that spoke to the sociocultural context of Child360. Interview questions included topics such as meaning making, research philosophy, assumptions, and the integration of CRE (see Appendix A). Before the interview, I shared the purpose and interview protocol with evaluators. This gave research evaluators the opportunity to begin reflecting on their practices prior to our scheduled time. Interviews were completed at the end of my internship rotation schedule and ranged between 45 minutes to 1 hour. I took a semi-structured approach and probed further when themes arose for which I had not developed an interview question. At the end of each interview, I took note of emerging themes and adapted the interview protocol to assess whether other evaluators shared similar experiences within the organization. By conducting interviews at the end of my project rotation, I was able to better understand the context in which each evaluator was situated.

Table 1. Project Rotation

Project	Evaluator	Project Rotation	Interview Date
Teacher Sub Pool Evaluation	Noelle Banelos	October – December	Week of April 1st
Best Start Communities Evaluation	Donna Escalante, Alejandra Portillo	January – February	Week of April 1st
First 5 CA Dual Language Learners Evaluation	Mariel Doerfel	April	Week of April 16th
Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership Evaluation	Claudia Benavides, Veronica Torres	May – June	Week of June 1st