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## Understanding Program Culture

### INSIGHTS FROM QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES OF THE PACE CENTER FOR GIRLS

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*This post is one in a continuing series aiming to inform implementation research in social policy evaluations. Contributors from inside and outside MDRC share lessons from past program evaluations and insights from ongoing studies.*

The culture of a program, also known as the “program environment,” is often of great interest in social services. Many researchers and practitioners view program culture or environment as a key aspect of service delivery and as a potential influence on participant outcomes. Staff members sometimes refer to their program environment as the “secret sauce” that no one knows exactly how to replicate. How, then, can researchers measure program environment and understand how it develops? Our [implementation study of the PACE Center for Girls](#), a gender-responsive program for at-risk girls in Florida, used mixed methods, incorporating qualitative and quantitative analyses, for an in-depth study of PACE’s program environment.

PACE’s program model is highly specified in detailed manuals and guidance from the PACE central office. To describe the program environment in each local site and to understand how the centralized guidance might have influenced those environments, we used a rich set of data gathered from multiple perspectives. For example, we analyzed rules governing staff and participant behaviors and choices, the program’s physical space, and how staff members interacted with participants.

We interviewed PACE staff members (112 in all) at 14 program center sites and asked them to describe the program environment they intended to create for girls. Although PACE centers operated in different contexts across Florida, staff members and participants described a similar program culture at all the sites in the evaluation. In line with principles of both youth programming and [gender-responsive programming](#), staff members emphasized that the environment should be safe from both physical and emotional threats, provide nurturing relationships for the girls, and demonstrate [strengths-based](#) and [trauma-informed](#) practice. PACE participants’ descriptions of their program experiences (collected through interviews and surveys) aligned with the environment described by staff members.

We compared our qualitative findings from the staff interviews with quantitative measures from the [Organizational Social Context \(OSC\)](#) survey. The OSC is one of many instruments available to measure organizational culture, organizational climate, and worker morale. While the OSC was developed for use in studies of mental health organizations, it has also been used in studies of other social service organizations.

Most PACE centers scored high on the OSC measures of organizational climate and organizational culture. On the measure of engagement, the survey indicated that PACE staff members felt per-

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sonally invested in their jobs, which is how most of them described their work in our interviews. PACE centers also scored high on the OSC's proficiency measure, indicating that PACE had a strong "client first" culture, in which staff decision-making is driven by what is in the best interest of the participants. Correspondingly, we learned from interviews how the staff would tailor responses to disciplinary issues to the particular circumstances of the girls involved.

The OSC also provided information about how staff members experienced their work environment, beyond the program environment that they were trying to create for participants. PACE centers scored high on the OSC's measures of rigidity and resistance, indicating that staff members felt they had limited discretion over job tasks and limited input into organizational practice. Such feelings are consistent with the fact that policy and procedures were promulgated by PACE's central office in Jacksonville, and most staff members had limited interaction with the policymakers. At the same time, nearly all PACE centers scored high on the OSC's measure of functionality, indicating that the tightly defined program model may provide staff members with clarity about their roles and opportunities for advancement within the organization.

Finally, PACE serves a high-needs population, and most PACE centers had moderate scores (neither very high nor very low) on the OSC's stress measure, indicating that staff members, to some degree, found their jobs to be emotionally exhausting or overwhelming. Yet the OSC morale scores were moderately high, which aligned with the personal investment in PACE that staff members described during interviews and that researchers observed during site visits.

Researchers and practitioners in youth programs often focus on the program culture as experienced by participants. Our study, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, was able to understand not only how the PACE culture was experienced by girls in the program but also how staff members experienced their work environment. In addition, we gained insight into how the centrally developed policies and procedures may have affected experiences of both participants and staff members in PACE programs at multiple sites.

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