



Promoting mental well-being among First Nations students through culturally relevant mentoring programs

CLAIRE CROOKS, PH.D., C.PSYCH.

WESTERN UNIVERSITY

DEINERA EXNER-CORTENS, PH.D., MPH

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

*School Mental Health Conference, New Orleans, LA
November 2015*

Talk Overview

Adaptation and expansion of evidence-based programs in an Indigenous context

Overview of the *Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Mentoring Programs*

Evaluation of the *Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Mentoring Programs*

Strategies for engaging and supporting Indigenous youth

ADAPTATION & EXPANSION OF EVIDENCE-BASED
PROGRAMS IN AN INDIGENOUS CONTEXT

What is the Fourth R

Evidence-based healthy relationships / violence prevention program for youth

Skills-based, SEL approaches, integrated into curriculum

Grade 9 program shown to:

- Decrease dating violence (boys)
- Increase condom use (boys)
- Increase healthy relationship skills
- Decrease peer violence among youth with cumulative experiences of maltreatment

Preliminary evidence supporting the grade 8 program



Why do Aboriginal youth need something different (more)?

Colonial history

Residential school and intergenerational trauma

Indian Act

Impacts of aggressive assimilative policies

Inequitable social determinants of health

Disproportionately poor health and academic outcomes

Dilemma of succeeding at school versus being authentic

“ Unfortunately our Aboriginal youth are feeling left out and excluded and are not knowing who they are. So having a program specifically to teach them pride and power is something we need to build on in order to increase their graduation rates and show them that school is a good thing. School will empower them and being proud of who they are is what Fourth R is helping to teach the kids. ” (Female educator)

Uniting Our Nations Partnerships

Approached by school board in 2004

Developed advisory

Partnered with local communities

Three main messages:

- Programming needs to be connected to culture
- Importance of transition to secondary school
- Importance of culturally similar mentors



Surface versus Deep Structure Adaptation

Surface – superficial details and images, misappropriating images

Deep – changes in content and approach that make the program more consistent with the recipient group's worldview and values

- Includes change in *how* materials are delivered

Deep structure adaptation takes a lot longer, is iterative, is localized by nature and requires trusting relationships

Comparison of Fourth R and Uniting Our Nations

Similarities

Emphasis on healthy relationships

Focus on skill development

Positive youth development framework

School-based programs aligned with curricula expectations

Commitment to documentation and development of manuals

Differences

Cultural connectedness as an underlying framework

Greater focus on mentorship

Higher degree of community partner involvement

Use of more holistic frameworks

More programming options outside of classroom time

UNITING OUR NATIONS PROGRAMS: OVERVIEW



Uniting our Nations program components

1) Elementary mentoring program (Grades 7 & 8)

- 18 weeks
- 1 hour session/week
- Facilitators are two First Nations young adults
- Based on the Medicine Wheel life cycles



Uniting our Nations program components

1) Elementary mentoring program (Grades 7 & 8)

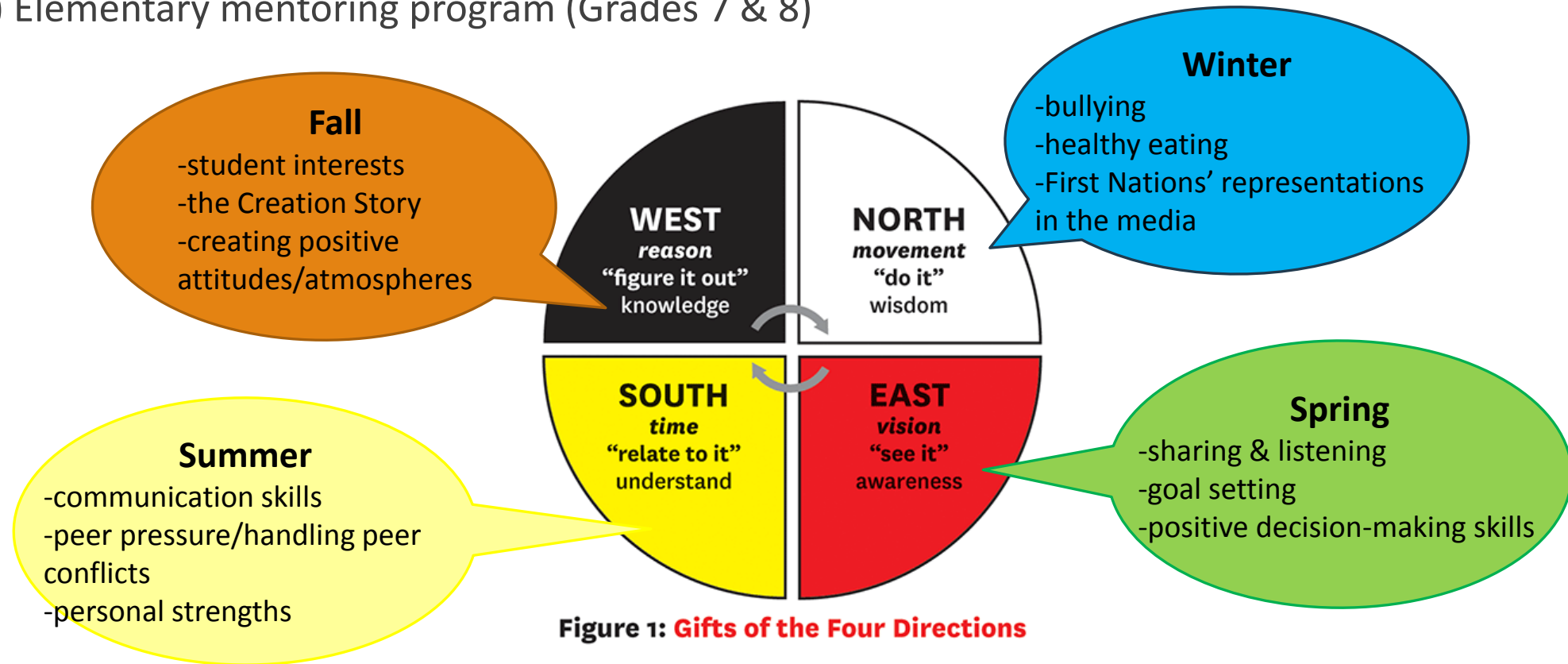


Figure 1: Gifts of the Four Directions

Uniting our Nations program components

2) Peer mentoring program (Grades 9-12)

- Program runs over the course of the school year
- 1 session/week (lunchtime meetings)
- Mentees are Grade 9 students
- Mentors are Grade 10-12 students
- Also includes teaching circle with adult mentor from the First Nations community (several times/semester)



Available Mentoring Resources

Elementary mentoring manual

Secondary peer mentoring implementation manual

Secondary peer mentoring manual for training mentors

Adaptation template for making the programs more localized



UNITING OUR NATIONS PROGRAMS: EVALUATION

Student voices

Cross-sectional study with student and adults including surveys and interviews (n=82)

Identified benefits included improved relationships, confidence, academic success, and belonging

“ It makes me feel good because I never really thought of myself as a mentor but I guess they must see something in me and it just feels good to be there and mentor the younger ones that are just starting and show them how to be a role model, something for them to look up to. ” (Male grade 12 student)

“ My most memorable experience was at the culture camp when we made the drums. Not only did I learn to make a drum, but I learned what all was involved during the process. I was also able to get the chance to awaken my drum and even learned to play a song. This is important to me because without that chance I would never have learned or even did it. It gave me a chance to learn about my culture which means a lot to me. I am able to teach my mom and grandparents who don't know very much about the culture either. ” (Survey, female grade 12 student)



Adult voices

Semi-structured interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders

See clear promotion and prevention benefits

“There are students that you saw in grade 9 and it’s their first thing that they ever got involved in and then by the time they are in grade 10 they are starting to go out to other clubs and then by grade 11 and 12 they are leaders within the school and not just within the First Nations groups. For example, this year one of our former mentors is the co-president of the school” (Female educator)

“Our students seem to be academically more successful than they were last year without the program. I see less students in the office, I think that’s probably the biggest issue that we noticed. There are probably 4 or 5 students in that grade 8 classroom who were seen significantly in the office and I don’t see them this year. In fact they make comments, “so do you miss me?” in fun, which is also something they would not have done before...I don’t think I have suspended any of the students in the program this year...whereas last year, I had suspended them many times” (Female principal).



Adult voices

Importance of culture – both as an identity issue and as a connectedness issue



... it gives them the identity that they are searching for. Who am I? Where do I come from? What am I about? I find that they don't feel so lost. They can ground themselves. It is hard to explain. They can ground their spirit. They know who they are. It is not like they are wandering around searching for an identity and then they can expand on that and find the sweat lodges and find the Elders and the teachings. (Female educator)

When I am sitting across from you and I am holding the hoop of your drum while you tie your prayer into it. There is this too, (motions to the space between us) there is all the energy we put into the drum because we are trying to make kind positive energy out of a hide and a tree and your life experiences that make you need this drum so when I sit across from you, you look at me and think you're like me. You're where I am from. When someone is making the drum and they say hey you look and sound and talk like me and you know my creation story and I remember my grandfather telling me this was against the law and look at us. There is nothing more powerful than that. (Male community partner)



Mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation

Followed a cohort of 105 youth from grade 7/8 to grade 9/10

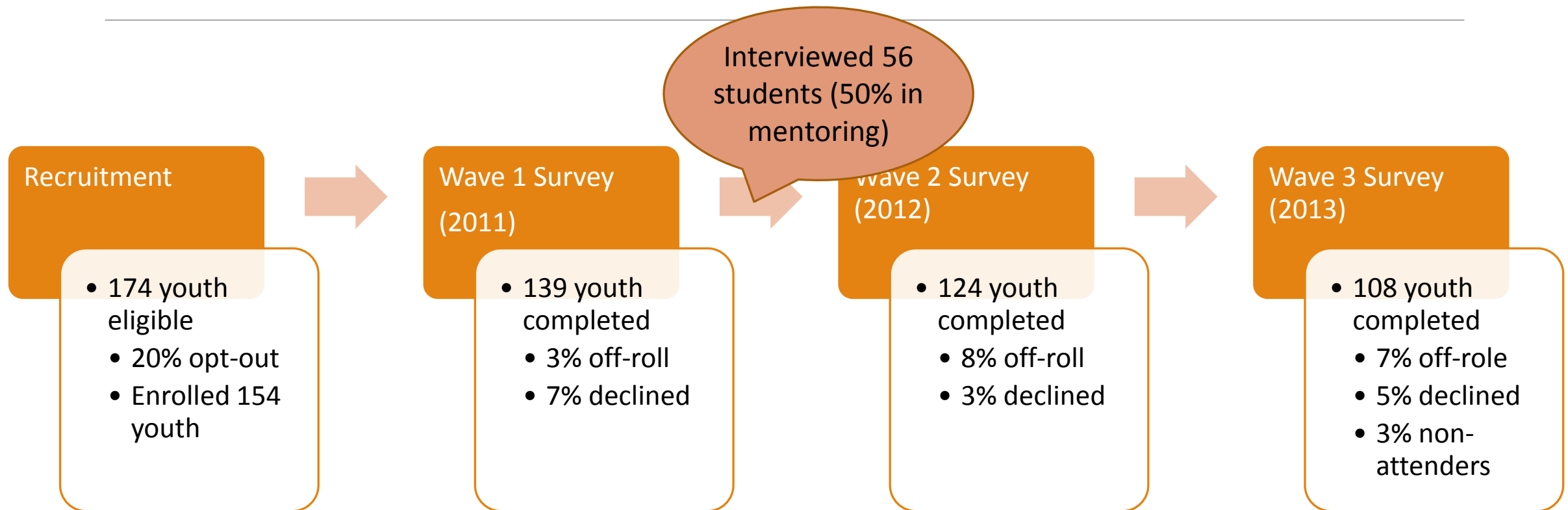
- Annual surveys
- Official school records
- Semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of participants

Evaluated impacts of two years of mentoring on emotional wellbeing and cultural connectedness

Positive impacts on both outcomes, even accounting for Wave 1 scores



Mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation



Mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation

Variable	Value at Wave 1
Age	Mean=12.59 years (SD=0.57)
% Female	49.5% (n=52)
% in Grade 7	39.0% (n=41)
% in Mentoring	17.5% (n=18)
Aboriginal ancestry	
• First Nations	93.2% (n=96)
• Métis	Less than 5
• Inuit	Less than 5
• Mixed ancestry	Less than 5
• No FNMI ancestry claimed	Less than 5

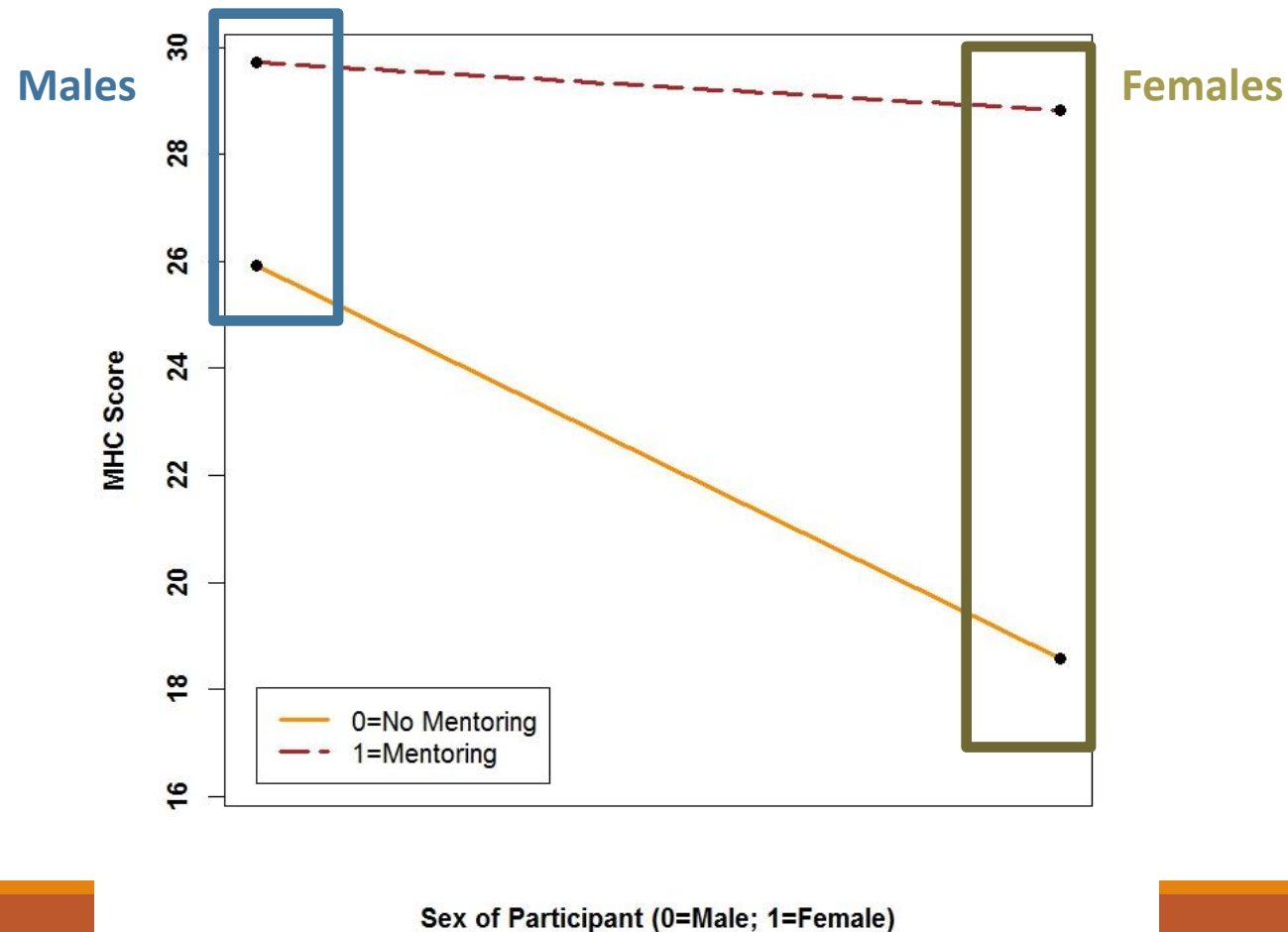


Mentoring participants had higher wellbeing scores

Dependent variable: Mental Health Continuum, Short-Form, Wave 3 (n=100)			
	b (SE)	95% CI	p value
Mentoring participant, yes	7.20 (3.48)	(0.29, 14.10)	.041
Sex, female	-6.30 (2.73)	(-11.72, -0.88)	.023
School climate	0.40 (0.29)	(-0.17, 0.96)	.16
Life satisfaction	1.31 (0.53)	(0.25, 2.36)	.016



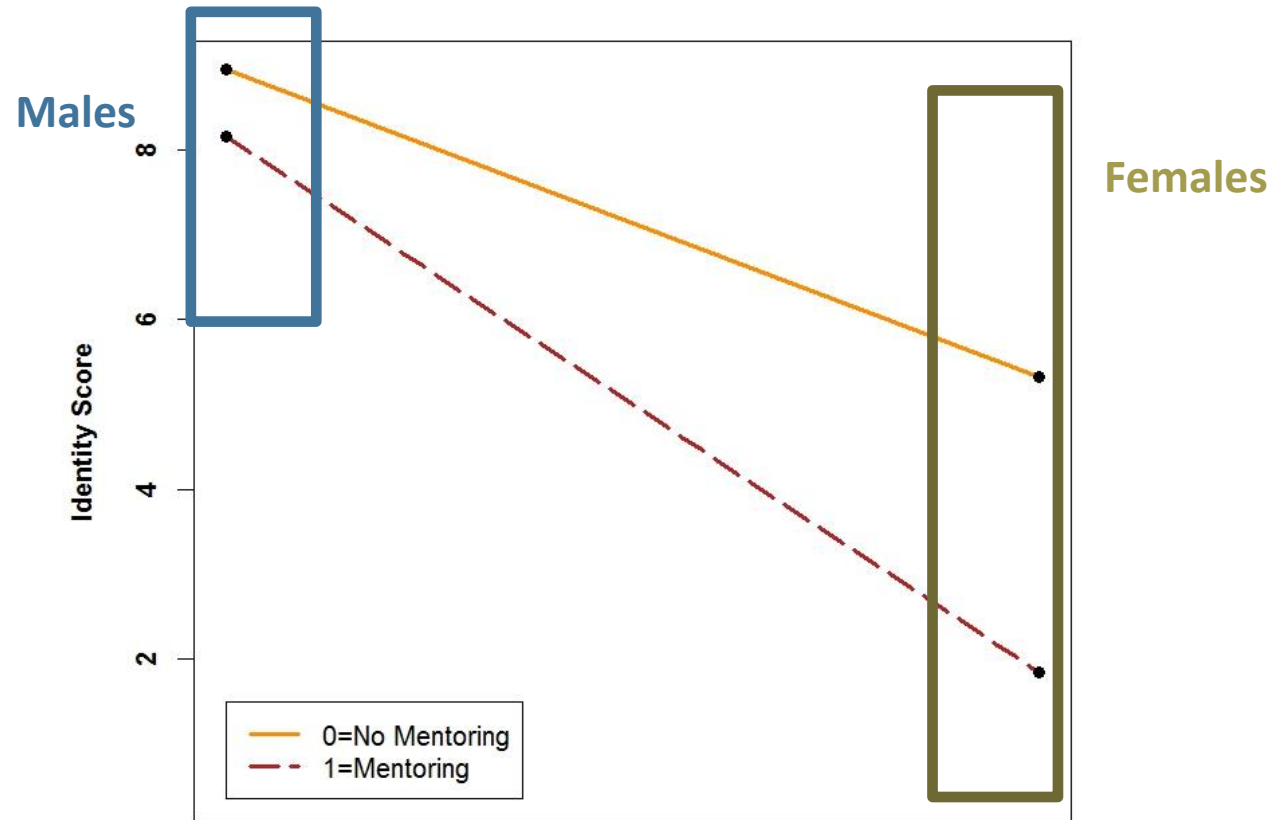
Mentoring participants had higher wellbeing scores



Mentoring participants had higher cultural connectedness (identity) scores

Dependent variable: Cultural Connectedness Scale-Identity, Wave 3 (n=99)			
	b (SE)	95% CI	p value
Mentoring participant, yes	2.99 (1.03)	(0.94, 5.03)	.0047
Sex, female	-1.64 (0.79)	(-3.22, -0.066)	.041
School climate	0.22 (0.093)	(0.032, 0.40)	.022
Identity, short scale	1.10 (0.20)	(0.71, 1.50)	<.001

Mentoring participants had higher wellbeing scores



Qualitative interviews

Three over-arching themes emerged from our interviews with mentoring participants

- 1) Intrapersonal
 - Program influenced personal growth, self-confidence and overall comfort in group settings
 - *"it also gives you more confidence speaking to a group of people"* (Male)

Qualitative interviews

Three over-arching themes emerged from our interviews with mentoring participants

- 2) Interpersonal
 - Program provided opportunities to meet new people, strengthen existing peer relationships and build connections with the program
 - *“We were friends and all but we didn’t talk as much, but now I talk almost every day when we see each other in the hall.”* (Female)
 - Facilitators were viewed as approachable, trustworthy & relatable
 - *“...we talk to them more than we usually do to the teachers...because with teachers, we do listen but with the mentors they make sure we know and we keep it locked down. Sometimes teachers don’t do that, so it doesn’t always click in. But they always try to make sure we remember.”* (Male)
 - *“It feels like they understand what I am trying to say and if it’s about my culture than they will know what I am trying to say.”* (Female)

Qualitative interviews

Three over-arching themes emerged from our interviews with mentoring participants

- 3A) Learning – culture
 - Culture served as a mechanism to establish an environment of trust and equality between students and facilitators
 - Program provided opportunities for students to connect their cultural teachings to their current life experiences, both in and outside of school
 - *“I like it because it teaches, it really opens your eyes about things because a couple a weeks ago we learned about Natives in the media and ya know like Pocahontas and Halloween costumes are kind offensive, and yes, yes they really are and its stereotypical so we are learning about eye opening subjects, such as that and cultural teachings.” (Female)*
 - Facilitators use cultural teachings to facilitate learning
 - *“Like they told us about how there is the four things there’s the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional; as I started thinking about that, it kinda told me to, ah, do things differently. So I was thinking well if I can get my grades up, I can help me mentally. If I can exercise and eat more I can physically and spiritual and everything I can try and get it up a higher level than it already is.” (Male)*



Qualitative interviews

Three over-arching themes emerged from our interviews with mentoring participants

- 3B) Learning – healthy relationship skills
 - Participants discussed positive communication skills and 4th R strategies and how they would use these strategies in real life
 - *“well [when] someone tries to talk you into doing something...you can avoid the problem, you can say, ‘hold on I gotta go do this real quick and I will be back.’ Or you can try to use your words. You can say, ‘I don’t want to do this because I might get in trouble or I might get hurt.’” (Male)*
 - Program also taught how to handle bullying and how to intervene when someone is being bullied

Convergence of quantitative and qualitative

Interviews with mentoring participants highlighted intrapersonal and interpersonal growth, and learning about healthy relationships and culture

“Like they told us about how there is the four things there’s the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional; as I started thinking about that, it kinda told me to, ah, do things differently. So I was thinking well if I can get my grades up, I can help me mentally. If I can exercise and eat more I can physically and spiritual and everything I can try and get it up a higher level than it already is.” (Male, grade 8)

Walking in Two Worlds

“If you’re an honors student and you're winning awards, are you going to be seen as selling out? There is that pressure. Having cultural connectedness in schools, we are now seeing students being selected as valedictorian, president of the student council as well as be part of the FNMI Student Advisory Council...All of these students are showing other kids that they can succeed and still be Aboriginal. I think that’s the key, showing kids that they don’t have to lose who they are in order to be successful in school...Our goal for FNMI students is not assimilation. We don't ask students to give up everything that they are to succeed. We know that you can keep connected to your culture and succeed at the same time.” (Female educator)



STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS YOUTH

Reflections

Partnerships are essential from start to finish

Importance of a social justice lens - Strengths-focused; change the environment

“Residential schools are so important for students to know about. Not just the residential schools but the aftermath and the before part too. It’s the whole idea of colonization. When they have an understanding they can stop blaming, and they can say ‘I deserve this pride,’ and the shame changes because they can understand it in a context.” (Female educator)

“I like it because it teaches, it really opens your eyes about things because a couple a weeks ago we learned about Natives in the media and ya know like Pocahontas and Halloween costumes are kind offensive, and yes, yes they really are and its stereotypical so we are learning about eye opening subjects, such as that and cultural teachings.” (Female, grade 8)

Acknowledgements

Over the past decade these programs and the research were possible only because of incredible partnerships with community partners, school boards, and the youth themselves.

This work was funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada

www.youthrelationships.org

