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Strengths-based Programming for First Nations Youth in Schools: Building Engagement Through Healthy Relationships and Leadership Skills

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Abstract First Nations youth in Canada demonstrate disproportionately high rates of negative behaviors such as violence, substance abuse, and leaving school early. An understanding of historical context and current environment helps explain these patterns. Providing culturally relevant opportunities for youth to build healthy relationships and leadership skills has the potential to increase youth engagement. Over the past four years our multidisciplinary team of researchers, educators, program developers, and community leaders have worked together to develop a number of school-based initiatives that focus on increasing youth engagement through building on strengths and the promotion of healthy relationships. Specific strategies include peer mentoring, a credit-based academic course, and transition conferences for grade 8 students. This article describes these initiatives and some of the early successes and challenges we have faced in the design and implementation of them. Preliminary evidence is presented to support the contention that these initiatives increase youth engagement.

Keywords Adolescence · Strengths-based programming · Indigenous youth · Mentoring · Youth engagement

Over the past five years our team has worked closely with First Nations youth, educators, community members, and our local school board to develop a number of strength-based violence prevention programs for First Nations youth. The need to provide specific programming for First Nations youth has been clearly identified by our provincial Ministry of Education out of recognition that Aboriginal youth in our province have by far the lowest rates of academic success and graduation of any identifiable group. We refer to our initiatives as *Uniting Our Nations: Relationship-based programming for First Nations youth*[1]. The primary objective of these initiatives has been to promote healthier relation-

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[1] More information about all of our initiatives is available at www.youthrelationships.org.

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ships and develop youth leadership skills in order to increase youth engagement and school connectedness. This article will begin by making a case for strength-based programming with First Nations youth in schools, with a focus on increasing youth engagement. We describe our various projects, followed by some of the successes and challenges we have experienced in the design and implementation phases. Finally, we offer some preliminary evidence that these initiatives are successfully engaging youth.

The Case for Strengths-based Programming with First Nations Youth

A strengths-based approach recognizes that there are developmental assets that universally promote positive outcomes and reduce negative outcomes, including violence (Aspy et al. 2004) and substance abuse (Scales 1999). A strengths-based approach is especially important for First Nations youth, because it takes the Canadian historical context into account. By placing the high rates of violence, substance abuse, and poverty experienced by First Nations families into the appropriate context of colonization and assimilation policies, it shifts the perceived deficits away from the individual and allows us to focus instead on the resilience many of these youth have demonstrated. Within this broader context, it can be seen that the deliberate suppression and elimination of culture and tradition led to multi-generational trauma, the impacts of which are clearly visible today. Although it is difficult to quantify direct effects, there is clear and compelling evidence that the long history of cultural oppression and marginalization has contributed to high levels of social and mental health problems in many First Nations communities (Kirmayer et al. 2003). Consequently, promoting youth assets within a framework that emphasizes cultural connection is a good fit for First Nations youth. In order for youth to benefit from these strengths-enhancing opportunities, they need to be engaged by them. Thus, youth engagement is a complementary framework for understanding how youth become involved and stay involved with positive activities, which in turn offer protection against some of the more negative outcomes.

The Importance of Youth Engagement

Youth engagement is a framework that resonates universally with program developers and researchers, but is actually somewhat difficult to describe and quantify. The Centre for Excellence on Youth Engagement (2007) has defined youth engagement as the "meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself. The kind of activity in which the youth is engaged can be almost anything—sports, the arts, music, volunteer work, politics, social activism—and it can occur in almost any kind of setting." Furthermore, it is accepted that engagement will look different for different youth, even with respect to the same activity. There is significant overlap between a youth engagement focus and a strengths- or assets- based approach in that many aspects of youth engagement (such as involvement in programs, sense of purpose, and having useful roles in the community) have been identified as specific developmental assets (Scales 1999).

Youth engagement is a nonspecific protective factor that has been connected to a wide range of positive outcomes including lower rates of school failure and drop-out (Mahoney and Cairns 1997) and lower rates of anti-social and criminal behaviors (Mahoney 2000). Other researchers have found youth engagement to be associated with decreased alcohol use, decreased marijuana and hard drug, lower rates of school failure, and lower rates of sexual activity and pregnancy (Komro et al. 1996; Jenkins 1996). Youth engagement in a

school setting overlaps with the concept of school connectedness, which has been found to be a strong protective factor against substance abuse and other negative behaviors in its own right (e.g., Resnick, et al. 1997; Sale et al. 2003).

Our Community and Projects

An understanding of our local context provides an important background for our programs. The Thames Valley District School Board spans London, Ontario (population 350,000) and a large surrounding rural area, with over 160 schools and 80,000 students. Within this geographical area, there are three First Nations—the Oneida Nation of the Thames, Chippewas of the Thames, and the Munsee-Delaware First Nation. Youth from these First Nations typically attend school in their own community until either grade 6 or grade 8, depending which elementary school they attend, and then are bussed into London to finish their schooling. There are three secondary schools in London in which First Nations and Métis students account for between approximately 5% and 24% of the student body. Because of the concentration of First Nations students at these schools, they have an additional support staff in the form of a First Nations Counsellor, and also offer Native Language and Studies courses. Our city also has a significant urban First Nations population.

We began working with First Nations youth in 2004 by bringing a group of youth together to develop video resources depicting common peer and dating conflicts faced by youth and a range of possible responses to those situations. The 23 youth in that first project spanned urban and different First Nations, in addition to representing different schools. The initiatives that we will describe in this paper include our secondary school peer mentoring program, a *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course,* and Grade 8 Transitions Conferences. We have developed other video projects and a healthy relationships curriculum described elsewhere (Crooks 2008; Crooks et al. 2008). We turn now to a description of our projects, and some of the successes and challenges of these projects. For a more thorough discussion of successes and challenges, see Crooks et al. 2009b.

Peer Mentoring

Mentoring has been identified as a promising strategy promoting positive social attitudes and relationships, and preventing substance abuse (Jekeliek et al. 2002). It is a particularly appropriate approach with Aboriginal youth, as mentoring is a concept that is woven into traditional values, even though the term may not be used specifically (Klinck et al. 2005). Mentoring can provide the connection to a role model that youth require, and may potentially offset other more negative relationships that the youth may be experiencing:

> More generally, having *someone* to confide in, to count on in times of crisis, someone to give advice and someone who makes one feel cared for are important factors in youth resilience and something that communities can help to provide even where the family is not the support it should be and where peers are more of a hindrance than a help. (Andersson and Ledogar 2008, pg 66).

The *Uniting Our Nations Peer Mentoring* program supports the development of healthy and positive relationships between younger secondary students[2] and peer mentors from

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[2] The mentees are typically younger, although in some cases mentors have provided support to senior students who have moved from remote areas or are returning to school after a prolonged absence.

senior grades. First Nations mentors are selected on the basis of being positive role models who have made a strong commitment to school. Groups of students meet on a weekly basis during lunch time and engage in a range of activities together, sometimes with a cultural focus, and sometimes not. The link with older students who have made a strong commitment to school helps smooth the transition from elementary to secondary school for the younger individuals, and provides them with important role models.

A unique aspect of the *Uniting Our Nations Peer Mentoring* program is the involvement of an adult mentor from the First Nations community who comes into the school several times per semester, typically to facilitate a teaching circle with the mentoring participants. This community mentor helps provide support to the school mentors, incorporates cultural teachings into the program, serves as a role model, and provides the opportunity for the youth to become connected to another healthy adult in their community. Furthermore, the inclusion of a community mentor shifts some ownership and responsibility of the program to the community.

Prior to beginning the program, all mentors receive a full day of training on the role and responsibilities of mentoring, and gain important role play experience to prepare them. We provide each mentor with a manual, which serves as a resource to them throughout the program. In addition, we have developed an implementation manual for schools who wish to run a similar program.

Successes

One of the most obvious indicators of the program's success is its longevity and growth. Although it began as a one year small pilot, we have been able to secure funding and an ever-growing number of interested youth over the past four years. To date, approximately 150 youth have participated in this project, many over a period of several semesters. Many of the mentees identify wanting to be a mentor themselves one day as a motivator for becoming involved, and to date 12 youth (of 104 mentees) have made that transition. There is an important philosophy underlying this transition from mentee to mentor in that the message is, "This transition from elementary school to secondary school can be challenging, everyone could use a little extra support, and once you have successfully made this transition you will be able to assist those who come after you," rather than a deficit-based message that there is something that needs to be fixed in the individual being mentored. Over time, the youths, along with their First Nations Counsellors have developed aspects of this program as their own, which has been reflected in the pride we see in some of our mentors who have been involved for the last four years. Youth ownership of a mentoring program is also a practice considered to enhance the quality of the program (Jekeliek et al. 2002).

Challenges

One challenge has been youth giving up their free time to be involved. Lunch may be their only time to socialize during the day. For youth being transported in from outlying communities, it may also be their only opportunity to socialize with urban friends. In addition, the program requires a lot of support. First, in accordance with school policy, a staff member needs to be accessible during mentoring. Second, there is a need for a timely feedback loop to identify any potential difficulties as they arise. Since the program's commencement in 2005, these support functions have been provided by the First Nations Counsellors. The third type of support required is logistical through the provision of

supplies, lunches, etc. The training day also has significant logistics in terms of organizing consent forms, transportation, and meals. Facilitating the return of consent forms from parents has been an ongoing challenge for a number of reasons: some parents are disengaged from the school system, some do not have telephones, and some are wary about their child being singled out for a program. These logistics have been coordinated and executed by our research team. The demands of the program, particularly on the First Nations Counsellors, limit the scalability of the program within a particular school and also to other schools, who may not have a First Nations Counsellor. Although the program has been integrated into the schools in some regards, there is still a significant amount of time and financial resources provided by our research team, which necessitates ongoing attempts to secure funding. It is worth noting that these challenges are not all unique to mentoring with First Nations students. A high level of structure and planning is consistent with successful mentoring program in general (Jekeliek et al. 2002).

Another challenge we have faced in the development of the program is the shortage of Aboriginal role models in the community available to serve in the role of community mentors. Adults who are strong role models for Aboriginal youth are already very busy within their own organizations or family life and committing additional time for volunteer work is often a challenge. Challenges in recruiting suitable adult community mentors have been noted by other researchers and program developers (Klinck et al. 2005).

First Nations Cultural Leadership Course

The *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course* grew out of the aforementioned successes and challenges of the peer mentoring and challenges we faced implementing our healthy relationships course (for a description of the latter see Crooks 2008; and, Crooks et al. 2009b). The goal was to create a course that would incorporate the strengths of peer mentoring into the classroom setting where youth would not have the additional demands created by the program being extracurricular and they could also earn academic credit for their significant work (either as mentors or mentees). Similarly, we wanted to be able to package some of the cultural identity components and healthy relationship skills included in our healthy relationships program into a course that would be accessed by a greater number of students.

The *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course* was developed and piloted in three secondary schools between September 2007 and June 2008. This course is a stacked course, in that it groups older and younger secondary students who are working on one of two credits—leadership or study skills—into the same classroom. It includes a peer mentoring component which pairs younger students with senior students and encourages them to work together, learn from each other, and develop strong relationships. The course also gave students an opportunity to participate in a number of cultural activities such as mask and drum-making, and allowed them to assume the roles of student leaders and volunteers for Aboriginal initiatives outside their school such as the *Uniting Our Nations Peer Mentoring* Training Day and two Grade 8 Aboriginal Transition Conferences.

Successes

The most notable success of this course has been the feedback from the students involved. Students who were involved at the senior level particularly enjoyed their leadership roles both within their schools and at board-wide initiatives. The opportunity to engage in leadership roles with appropriate supports was a really positive experience.

There were also successes at the system level. First, despite some challenges related to funding, staffing, and class size, the course was adopted internally by two of the three pilot schools (and the third school intends to implement it again this year). Secondly, our research team (in conjunction with the local school board) has been funded by the provincial Ministry of Education to hold a regional symposium to train educators from 16 boards and disseminate these materials to schools across the South Western Region.

Challenges

The challenges faced in implementing this course largely relate to staffing and student numbers. School Administrators face the challenge of ensuring a minimum number of students are enrolled in any given course before it can be offered. Classes with too few students are often dropped from the course calendar (at least for that semester) in order to maximize resources and staffing. As a newly developed course that meets the needs of specific learners and is culturally specific, class numbers were low for at least one of the pilot schools, and flexibility in offering the class despite the low numbers was met with some resistance.

A second challenge faced by at least one of the schools is selecting and matching the mentees and mentors. Selecting mentees who are struggling the most may undermine the course in that they may not engage enough to benefit from it.

A third challenge faced in the pilot implementation of the stacked course was related to staffing for the course. Initially, our research team received short-term funding to support the teacher salary for the stacked course in two of our pilot schools. The teacher selected to teach the course in these two schools was an educator who had been involved with our team for a number of years and who assisted with the writing of the curriculum, and had been extensively involved with the *Uniting Our Nations* projects. While this short-term approach worked very well for the pilot, it is not a long-term sustainable plan. Indeed, in one school where a teacher unfamiliar with our Aboriginal projects and the importance of this program was selected to teach the course, the implementation of the program was not as successful. Teacher buy-in is a critical factor in ensuring the course is delivered to students in the manner it was developed.

Transitions Conferences

We began our work with grade 9 students in large part because we knew that the transition from grade 8 to grade 9 is challenging for many First Nations students. In building a comprehensive program, the next logical step was to shift some attention to youth on the other side of the transition—those in grade 8. Our first initiative focusing on grade 8 students was the development of Grade 8 Transition Conferences.

The purpose of these conferences is to prepare senior elementary school students for a successful transition to high school. Specific conference themes have stressed engagement in extracurricular activities, building confidence, and making positive choices. Each conference included a strong cultural component, inviting Elders and guest speakers from the community to lead smudging, song, and ceremonial prayer practices, demonstrate Aboriginal dance, and share Aboriginal artwork. As a follow-up to the conference, two resource packages were created and supplied to Grade 8 students and their educators. In addition, a First Nations Youth Liaison Coordinator visited elementary schools that sent Grade 8 students to the transition conference to conduct further follow-up activities. A Transition Conference Organizational Manual was created to document these processes.

Successes

To date four conferences have been held, involving more than 200 students. The conferences have been well-received by students, teachers and the local First Nations communities (including urban). Significant community outreach stemming from the conferences has taken place in participating Grade 8 schools. Another success of the transition conferences has been the participation of the local First Nations communities to help plan and facilitate the day's events. The conferences have been most successful when they have included positive adult and student role-models within our local First Nations communities.

An unanticipated success that we have noticed over the past few years is the significant media attention surrounding the transition conferences. For the past two years, the conferences were featured in our local newspaper, as well as on several local news channels. Many of our students were interviewed and had their pictures taken. This media coverage has raised awareness among schools and the larger community about the unique challenges facing First Nations students and the need to provide supports for these students. Moreover, students felt a sense of pride watching the news and reading the newspaper articles that featured a conference in which they played a major role.

Challenges

A common challenge we have faced in the past several years in organizing the Transition Conferences is related to finding appropriate First Nations and non-First Nations guest speakers. The challenge is to find speakers who can incorporate traditional teachings in a dynamic way for elementary students. Dyadic presentations at these conferences have been well-received *only* when coupled with dynamic, interactive activities for students. We have found that a successful strategy for identifying appropriate speakers is to seek feedback from partners who have seen a similar presentation by the speaker, prior to asking them to present.

Similar to our other projects, planning this conference requires a lot of logistical and financial support from schools, the school board, and our research centre. Recruiting and selecting guest speakers, arranging transportation, venue, meals, and developing conference programming is ongoing for several months prior to the conference date. This requires a group of staff working on the details of the conference to ensure a successful outcome. Moreover, when implementing two transition conferences a year (fall and spring), it is important that each are different enough to warrant releasing students from their regular school day for a full-day conference. Indeed, some of the feedback we have received from school administrators on this issue has been the need to balance student absenteeism with meaningful and appropriate activities and events, ensuring that students benefit from each conference in unique and different ways.

Evidence of Increased Youth Engagement

Over the past four years, we have collected data throughout the development and implementation of these initiatives. This data collection has been multi-faceted (including surveys, standardized questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and official school data) and also multi-informant (from youth, educators, First Nations Counsellors and administrators).

It is important to acknowledge that these data have been collected as part of a formative evaluation; that is, primarily to provide feedback from the various stakeholders of the program and make changes as indicated, rather than as a part of an a priori evaluation.

Youth engagement can be a difficult thing to measure, because it manifests itself in thoughts, feelings and actions. There is no one measure or indicator of youth engagement. The Centre for Excellence on Youth Engagement provides a useful framework in conceptualizing youth engagement in terms of behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal indicators (CYE 2007). This framework and several examples of indicators are presented in Fig. 1.

Within this context of formative evaluation, we present numerous examples of evidence for increased youth engagement. We identify behavioral, cognitive and attitudinal indicators, in keeping with the model.

Behavioral Indicators of Engagement

- Once youth become involved in mentoring, they are likely to continue.

The peer mentoring program shows a very high retention rate for both mentors and mentees. Of the 59 mentors involved to date, only two failed to complete even one semester (due to leaving school for unrelated reasons). Of the remaining 57, 56% ($n=33$) completed one semester only. Of mentors who completed only one semester, reasons for not being involved further included graduation (9%), having completed their first semester at the time of this analysis, in which case involvement may be ongoing (36%), critical life events that led to leaving school, such as sustaining a serious assault, moving, or in one case, death (15%), and choosing to not be further involved for reasons unknown (39%). Once students have been involved for more than one semester, they tend to be involved as mentors until they graduate or leave school. Indeed, three of the 59 mentors have been involved for five semesters each. Of those enrolled as mentees, 77% completed at least one semester. It is difficult to interpret the failure to complete of the other 23% as this group includes students
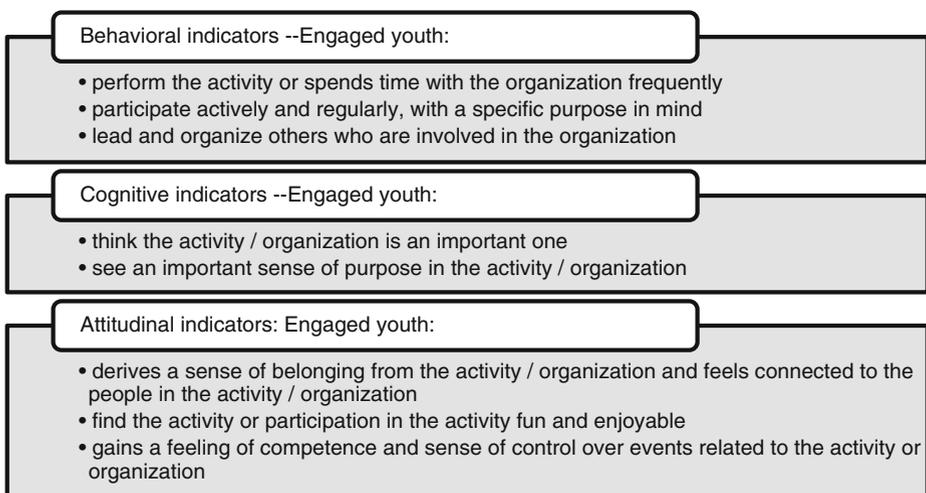
Fig. 1 Behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal indicators of youth engagement

who moved, did not engage in the program at all, as well as those who attended several sessions and then drifted away.

- Students in the *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course* showed higher academic performance and lower absenteeism in this class compared to their other courses.

During the pilot year of the *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course,* class grades and absenteeism information were obtained for students at one of the schools offering the course. These data indicated that students tended to do much better academically in the course (74.5% vs. 50.7%), but also that they attended much more regularly (on average 20% fewer absents). This finding of lower absenteeism is not related to transportation, because unlike the peer mentoring training program, there are no specific transportation provisions for the *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course*. If anything, students are more likely to miss the first class of the day (which is when this course was offered) due to missing the bus or sleeping in. Nonetheless, these data need to be interpreted cautiously for three reasons; they do not include the youth who dropped out of the course, it is based on one class, and the class was taught by a highly motivated and engaging educator chosen by our team. The extent to which these results would be replicated by the average teacher being assigned the course is not clear at this point. However, we are cautiously optimistic that providing a class that combines culturally enhancing activities, a focus on healthy relationships, and mentoring opportunities can better engage youth.

Cognitive Indicators of Engagement

- Senior youth in the *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course* articulated a high level of engagement and desire to be role models to others.

A number of the senior students involved in the first pilot of the *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course* provided written comments at the end of the course. They were asked what the class taught them and also to give advice for those who might consider taking it. Sample responses show the importance with which they viewed the class and their leadership role:

> I learned a lot of leadership skills when being in this class. This class motivates me more when coming to school and facing problems. I learned to respect others more because you never know what is on their mind. To take consideration on what I'm doing because there is always someone watching. I would recommend this class to everyone that is coming to high school because it is the first class in the morning and it is chilling and is good for the people that get up early every morning. It teaches you to be a mentor right in the morning so you can show some leadership skills all day.

> I would tell future mentors that in order to make this a fun class, you can't be shy or always sitting in a corner. You have to speak what you want to say, show your feelings and talk to everyone in class. Being a role model to the younger youth is fun because they look up to you and expect you to be their guide when they need you.

> Treat this very seriously, even if the person you're mentoring is your friend, you must do everything you can and teach what you think would be helpful to them. It's their future that you're helping so don't think it's a joke because it won't have good results in the end.

Although the majority of the qualitative feedback was positive, there were a few more neutral or negative comments related to two themes. First, there were two comments that suggested that the gap between students' lives out in the community and at school was too wide for the skills they learned in the class to be relevant:

> I would like to see us taking more trips to the rez to see how our lives are different at home than at school. Many of us have families that need help.

> This class is great but I don't think I'd use what I learned here because people might laugh.

The other theme that arose was the importance of the peer context for this group. Because the group work and relationships are such an integral part of the course, the overall experience can be less positive if the group dynamic is not strong. This impact was captured by the comment of a student who took the course two years in a row:

> This year's class was way different than last years. This year the group wasn't as fun and outgoing as last.

Attitudinal Indicators of Engagement

- Elementary students attending the transitions conferences indicate lower levels of anxiety and a higher degree of optimism and confidence about their transition to secondary school following their participation in the conferences.

With each of the five conferences we have held to date, we have had the student participants complete brief surveys before and after the conference. These surveys are face valid and ask students to rate their degree of concern or comfort about various changes they will face in the transition to secondary school. They are also asked about plans for involvement with various programs at the secondary school level.

Ratings indicate that 76% of student participants feel more confident about the transition to grade 9, and 73% of the student participants reported that the conferences eased their concerns about high school. Prior to the conferences, many students reported concerns that are common to all high school students, such as finding their locker, getting on the right bus, not having a recess, and having new teachers. After the conferences, many of these concerns had been reduced. For example, in the most recent conference, of the students who reported being concerned about making friends, 46% were no longer concerned after the conference. The conferences also raise student awareness about opportunities available in secondary school and encourage them to become involved. For example, following the conferences 73% of students declared the intent to participate in the peer mentor program, and 59% indicated that they intended to enroll in the *First Nations Cultural Leadership Course* (i.e., stacked course). These statements of intent should be interpreted cautiously as intentions are notoriously poor predictors of behavior, but at the very least, they indicate an increased awareness of some of the special opportunities that are available to students as they enter high school.

Quotes provided by conference attendees on their evaluations suggest that they find the conference to be useful and that is has increased their sense of confidence about transitioning to high school:

> The panel helped answer some questions about entering high school… I feel more comfortable and ready to start high school.

Some of the information will help me so I don't feel as scared as I was before. Now I [know] more people.

It educated me more on the resources available to help me if needed.

- Youth involved in the mentoring program express a high degree of satisfaction and enjoyment in the program.

Final surveys from both mentors and mentees consistently indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the program. The following examples are very typical of the responses on these surveys:

"We get along great and like to just hang out and we talk about all sorts of different stuff" (mentee).

"It's fun to eat our lunch together and talk about school" (mentor).

"We have these things where we understand each other and we talk about school and other important things" (mentee).

"I am really excited about being a part of the peer mentoring program again. I believe that this is a very helpful program that benefits not only the mentees but the mentors as well" (mentor).

Limitations

There are a number of limitations respecting the engagement data presented in this paper. First, youth may have felt pressure to provide positive feedback to the program developers. Although students were able to provide comments confidentially (i.e., without directly sharing them with the teachers or First Nations Counselors overseeing the mentoring program), they may still have felt compelled to comment on the positive aspects and minimize negative feedback. Second, the data presented would be stronger with additional quantitative indicators; most notably, we did not collect any quantitative data relating to cognitive engagement. Finally, although increased youth engagement is hypothesized to lead to more positive outcomes in behaviors such as violence and substance use down the road (and these links have been demonstrated in other research), currently we do not have the data to investigate those links for these programs. Clearly a more rigorous longitudinal evaluation is warranted, where the impact of these programs on a range of behaviors can be evaluated.

Youth Engagement Indicators Summary

The examples of behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal indicators of youth engagement presented in this paper are not exhaustive, nor are they offered as some sort of definitive evaluation. However, within the context of the aforementioned limitations, they do collectively suggest that these initiatives are at the very least engaging youth and enhancing their school experience. At the same time, these lists of indicators do not adequately capture some of the successes and growth we have seen in participants. Our involvement over a multi-year period has allowed us the privilege of seeing the paths youth follow over time. Many youth have provided us with case studies in youth

engagement and empowerment and we briefly describe the paths of two such individuals here.

The first young woman initially participated in a couple of our videos, and then subsequently became a mentor in the secondary school mentoring program. During her time in the mentoring program she had the opportunity to present at meetings and conferences with us and after graduating from high school she chose to pursue performing arts at college in a nearby city. (As an aside, her first exposure to performing arts was making violence prevention videos with our team). After her first year of college she transferred to college back in London and now works part-time for us as a Research Assistant. We have seen her poise and professionalism grow immeasurably, and she is a passionate advocate for youth and violence prevention. Obviously not all of this young woman's successes can be attributed to our program, but availing herself of some of the opportunities provided by these programs has had an impact on her education and career decisions.

Another young woman involved with us over a number of years has had a different, but similarly distinguished pathway. When we first met this young woman, she was in grade 9 at one of the schools helping us make a video. She was enthusiastic and friendly, but also attending a school from which it is not even possible to get a high school diploma (in part due to disruptions in schooling related to medical complications). Over the next few years it was a pleasure to see this young woman grow and mature as she worked with us on other video projects, then in the peer mentoring program (where she was a mentor for five consecutive semesters), and finally on a youth panel at the grade 8 transitions conference. Along the way she found the confidence to transfer back into a regular stream school and went on to be the co-student president of the largest school in a board of over 120,000 students. In addition to being the first Aboriginal student president in the school board, she won an award for her violence prevention leadership. Now graduated, she has continued to be involved with us, most recently serving as a panel member for an educator awareness training day. The leadership and speaking skills she developed in these initiatives have stood her in good stead, but even more importantly is the confidence and empowerment she experienced through her involvement. She has been accepted for a youth volunteer-service program that will entail travelling and working with other youth around the country. This young woman is clear that she would never have pictured herself taking on this kind of challenge without her experiences in the *Uniting Our Nations* programs.

Future Directions

Looking forward, we are continuing to focus on initiatives that support First Nations students in making a successful transition from elementary to secondary school. We have expanded our efforts with grade eight students this year through a new mentoring pilot that utilizes young adult mentors. Similar to the secondary school mentoring program, this mentoring approach will focus on healthy relationship skills. To provide structure, we have outlined session topics to cover issues that are pertinent to students' health and well-being (ranging from substance use and peer violence to healthy eating and identity).

We are also working on building system capacity through professional development of educators. In particular, we see a need for teachers, administrators and school staff to be aware of cultural issues and history, and have specific strategies to foster success among First Nations youth. Based on comments from students and our own experiences having non-First Nations teachers implement these programs, we realize that the awareness and comfort levels of many teachers are on par with that of most Canadians, which is to say they are not very familiar with the historical context and furthermore may not even

understand the need for greater awareness. We have begun to develop and conduct teacher awareness training in partnership with our board. These sessions provide the critical historical and cultural context, but also focus on specific actions that teachers can take to be more effective with First Nations youth.

Finally, we have expanded our efforts to better engage parents and community members. We are piloting several parent engagement strategies, including an increased presence at community events, such as attending a Fall Fair at a local First Nation and co-sponsoring a family night at the Friendship Centre, as well as recruiting a larger number of community-based mentors to provide support across all of our programs and increase our links with the community. We have documented a number of the lessons learned and practical strategies for engaging and empowering youth, engaging parents, and working effectively with both the school system and community partners in a toolkit we developed with input from contributors around the country (Crooks et al. 2009a). This toolkit also has a section on strategies and considerations for research and program evaluation.

In closing, this paper presents the descriptions, successes and challenges of a number of school-based initiatives we have undertaken with First Nations youth. Taking a strengths-based approach has meant focusing on building youth engagement and skills rather than targeting single problem behaviors. Although long term data are required to the impact of these strategies, we do have preliminary evidence that these initiatives increase youth engagement, which is a strong protective factor against a host of negative outcomes. In addition, we have seen many ripple effects through our work, including greater engagement by educators and community members in partnerships. Our biggest success (and hardest to capture!) has been the emergence and development of a core group of First Nations youth leaders in the area of healthy relationships, cultural awareness and leadership. Some of the leaders have already graduated and moved into postsecondary education programs that will help them meet their goals of working with First Nations youth. Looking forward, as these youth leaders move into educator and community roles, the number of First Nations role models will increase throughout the educational system, leading to a better system for all First Nations youth. Finally, it is worth noting that although these programs have been developed in a Canadian context, the themes of strengths-based programming and an emphasis on strengthening cultural identity make them relevant for indigenous youth in other countries. Because the impacts of colonization on indigenous peoples have been similar in a number of countries, there is a strong potential to successfully adapt these programs for other contexts internationally.

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