



### 3.3 UNITING NATIONS

#### A Culture-Focused Mentoring Approach

Mentoring programs have been increasingly intentional about incorporating or deepening cultural awareness and responsiveness in program activities and among mentors themselves. For mentor Mike Cywink, culture is in his bones, and he gets to impart it to some of the First Nation young people he engages. For others, he draws it out of them.

Mike is Anishinaabe, a member of the Whitefish River First Nation. He hails from Manitoulin Island in Ontario, Canada, nestled in the upper part of Lake Huron. The Anishinaabe are among hundreds

of Indigenous nations in Canada. Nearly half of the country's more than 600,000 First Nation population live on reserves — land designated for Indigenous peoples through a compact between the First Nations and the government of Canada.

Many reserves are in lightly populated and rural areas. Mike moved from his native reserve to London, Ontario nearly a decade ago. Situated between Toronto and Detroit, London is a rapidly diversifying population center in southwestern Ontario with a mix of European descendants, Indigenous people, and newer Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants. Moving to the big city was a big shift for Mike. As he puts it: "I came from a community of 4,000 and moved to a place with 400,000!" He also admitted to being a Detroit Redwings hockey fan, which he quips may have played some part in moving to nearby London.

#### From Small Community Learning to Big-City Schools

Such a transition experience is common among the First Nation youth Mike now mentors. Among the First Nation reserve communities surrounding the city of London, Chippewa of the Thames and Oneida Nation of the

Thames operate their own elementary schools separate from the Thames Valley District School Board, which runs public schools in London proper. Some of these First Nation schools stop at sixth grade and others at grade eight, at which time students are shifted to the London city education system in the middle grades or to high school. The result is that students used to a small, tight-knit, culturally homogeneous learning environment find themselves amid a mix of young people they don't know in a bigger school a good bus ride away from home.

"One of the things that is most disheartening is that they do not see themselves reflected in this school," says Anne Elliott about the First Nation students. Anne is vice principal of Lambeth Public School, a building of 800 students in Lambeth, a neighborhood in the southwest outskirts of London. The school serves young people from the Oneida Reserve, about 20 minutes away. "The students are being bused from a community that is different," Anne elaborates. "The homes are different, the landscape is different. And when they arrive here the teachers are different. The students come from a small school in a small community and now they are separated from each other."



For young adolescents, who developmentally are consumed with introspection about who they are and their place in the world, this fish-out-of-water experience can be jarring. There are some activities with sixth graders still at school in the reserve to create a bridge. But, once in seventh grade, the First Nation students are in an entirely new environment than the one in which they've grown up.

That's where Mike Cywink comes in. Mike meets with six to ten First Nation youth at each of four London area elementary schools that serve seventh and eighth graders — Aberdeen, Lambeth, Woodland Heights, and Delaware Central Public Schools. He is a school liaison for Uniting Our Nations, a set of programs focused on Indigenous peoples in Ontario run by a group of educators and researchers from the Centre for School Mental Health at Western University. Claire Crooks, professor at the university and the Centre's director, spearheaded the development of the program to address the transition First Nation youth face in a targeted way.

"We recognized that there is a group of kids who are getting missed," Claire says, describing the origins of the program. "We

needed to do something more intentional." She and her colleagues put together a committee of educators and community partners to examine the needs of First Nation youth as they make transitions in between the early elementary years and the later high school years. The group felt that mentoring was a positive, strengths-based approach, and a good way for the importance of culture to be incorporated.

***"The best part of the mentoring experience for me is to see young people self-identify as a First Nation person and seeing them grow within that."***

***—Mike Cywink, School Liaison, Uniting Our Nations, Center for School Mental Health, Western University***

#### **Time-Honored Traditions as Tools for Present-Day Youth**

But the cultural emphasis required thoughtful implementation. "We needed to avoid a pan-Indigenous approach," Claire cautions. "There are hundreds of different cultures within First Nations. While there are universal beliefs and practices, if you want to speak to First Nation youth in an authentic way, it needs to be highly relationship-based, getting to know who they are in their specific cultural context."

One way Uniting Our Nations gets to this specificity is by emphasizing the importance of language and terminology. Words like Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, and Metis, often need to be discussed and selected or changed depending on the individual cultural context. School educators collaborate with community leaders and elders to make these important determinations.

This effort toward cultural specificity is essential for building relationships with First Nation youth. "He's not from where we're from," jokes Jorja about Mike. Jorja is a 13-year-old seventh grader at Lambeth who takes part in the program. "We are Haudenosaunee and he is Ojibwe. He has different stories and we often correct him!"

The stories and traditional practices of First Nation peoples are infused throughout the Uniting Our Nations mentoring approach. The program runs 16 weeks, eight in the fall-to-winter months and another eight in the winter-to-spring timeframe. In that time, Mike meets with a small group of young people in each school once a week for one hour during the school day.



The first handful of sessions involves getting-to-know-you activities centered on some foundational Indigenous beliefs, including a particular First Nation creation story. The young people gather in a small circle at the beginning of each session to kick things off each week. “The first thing we do when we meet is a cultural practice called the smudge,” Mike describes. “It stems from our creation story.”

Mike lights a bowl of sage — the smudge — which relates to the Ojibwe teachings surrounding the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is common across Indigenous peoples. While elements of the wheel vary by nation, they are generally divided into quadrants, each representing different aspects of existence that humans progress through: life stage (child, youth, adult, elder), season (winter, spring, summer, fall), direction (north, south, east, west), being (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual), attributes (generosity, wisdom, bravery, fortitude). A different sacred animal (deer, buffalo, bear, eagle) and herb (sage, cedar, tobacco, sweetgrass) correspond to each quadrant as well, which is where the burning sage of the smudge comes in.

“It’s like a spiritual cleanse,” Mike explains. “It’s like a shower, but for the spirit. You smudge your eyes, your mouth, and your heart.” It has a calming and centering effect, much like meditation. It’s a way for the young people to bond with one another through ritual. It readies them to open up, share, and take in lessons Mike has for them. And the young people become very respectful of the practice. “It’s so, so important,” Mike says. “If I forget it, the kids are on me. They need to do it. It’s like brushing your teeth.”

Following the smudge, Mike engages the young people in a topic of the week. The lessons are especially relevant to young people in the early adolescent period. They are broached through a cultural story, practice, or belief, addressing the present needs and concerns and interests of youth using traditional context.

“We compare what’s happening to us now with what happened to our people back then,” says Gracie, also a seventh grader at Lambeth. “Like fighting and violence. We learn about the tree of peace. When there were wars going on between our nations, one person realized we needed to stick together to save our culture. They buried the weapons underneath a

tree. So, we talk about bullying and how to make good friendships.”

Another topic is healthy eating. The young people learn about the First Nation legend of the three sisters — the crop triumvirate of corn, beans, and squash. The lesson here is harmony and balance in the diet, much like the three sisters support and depend on each other. As the *Uniting Our Nations* program manual explains: “The beans help create nitrogen for the corn, which needs a lot to produce a good crop. The corn provides a structure for the trailing beans to grow upon. The squash reduces the weeds and shades the soil to maximize water usage, as well as deterring hungry intruders with the prickly hairs on their vines.”

These and other lessons that cut across youth experience — developing self-esteem, avoiding substance abuse, building communication skills, making future choices, having positive attitudes — are all conveyed through traditional stories and customs.

### **Forming Cultural Identities for Landings and Jumping-Off Points**

The cultural context of *Uniting Our Nations* is tailor-made for young adolescents going through



a process of identity formation, particularly peer identity. Research shows that the associations young people form at this age are highly formative and will be long lasting. This is true for young people who are strongly attuned to their First Nation culture, and those who are distant from it.

“The students from Aberdeen are very different from those at Lambeth,” says Mike, speaking of his mentees from the two London city schools with seventh and eighth graders in the program. “There are ‘urban First Nation’ students at Aberdeen. They did not grow up on the reserves. They are from local city neighborhoods. They live here in London.”

For them, he says much of the effect of the Uniting Our Nations program is to get young people more in touch with their cultural heritage, to understand it, embrace it, and make it a part of their identity in a positive way. For students at Lambeth, who are immersed in their culture living on the Oneida Reserve, Uniting Our Nations leverages that cultural identity to help navigate the challenging school and developmental transitions of early adolescence.

“I can’t stress enough how important the cultural piece is

to students,” Mike implores. Also important is getting the cultural piece from someone who is part of that culture himself.

“One of the biggest things is having a facilitator who can relate to any of these kids,” explains Charlene Camillo. Charlene was Mike’s predecessor at Uniting Our Nations, a school liaison/mentor in the early goings of the model. She is now a learning coordinator for the Thames Valley District School Board, working to support First Nation students across all London city and area schools. She is a member of the Moose Cree First Nation.

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***—Paul McKenzie, Assistant Superintendent for Student Achievement, Thames Valley District School Board***

“I see a lot of kids who might not want to identify as Indigenous for a variety of reasons — dealing with the backlash sometimes,” she says. “But having opportunities for kids to learn about their own identity builds their estimate of themselves, their self-confidence. Having

mentors who have the same background helps.” She believes that has helped Mike and her connect with First Nation youth. “Mike and I actually went to the same high school. We’re both outgoing. We’ll find kids’ interests.”

Broadly, this role that mentors like Charlene and Mike play is vital in schools, according to Paul McKenzie, superintendent for Student Achievement for Thames Valley. “For the early adolescent period, when so many things are going on, the mentoring space is a safe and welcoming space for students,” he says. “Let’s face it: the classroom may be fifth on the list of importance to them. These are the years when connectivity is so vital — connecting to caring adults. Feeling a sense of belonging, that someone has your back. We need more of this in our schools.”

McKenzie feels that this is especially the case for First Nation students transitioning into the public school system. “We have to make sure that their first year here has a safe landing point.” The cultural focus of Uniting Our Nations builds the capacity of schools to create that safe landing point, while also speaking to the holistic learning and development needs of young adolescents.



“Uniting Our Nations is something I would have loved to have had myself,” says Charlene Camillo. “Those opportunities just weren’t in place when I was in school. When you are living in a diverse urban setting, there are so many stereotypes. You need a place where you can be comfortable with who you are and carve your path from there.”

### **Being in Touch with Cultural Identity Can Lead to Being in Touch with School**

Claire Crooks and her colleagues at Western University have studied the effects of Uniting Our Nations over time. They have been specifically interested in how cultural connectedness — which they define as the extent to which an individual feels connected to their culture — is a “protective factor” for First Nation youth. Does it bolster their resiliency against the many adversities they face as Indigenous peoples?

Researchers did in fact find increases in cultural identity formation and cultural connectedness among the program’s participants. A qualitative study showed that youth felt they had more opportunity to explore their identity and, importantly, felt they didn’t have to compromise that

identity in order to succeed in school. The researchers gleaned that these assets boosted resilience, countering negative effects of shame and experiences with racism. The program has also seen effects more broadly important to young people in early adolescence. Participants were more engaged in school generally — beyond the program — and they began to see themselves as leaders.

“Uniting First Nations has given these students the opportunity to really celebrate authentically what makes them, how they define themselves as individuals,” says Anne Elliott. “They have a sense of pride about it. They don’t feel like they need to keep it hidden.”

This ultimate outcome is especially satisfying for Mike Cywink. “The best part of the mentoring experience for me is to see young people self-identify as a First Nation person and seeing them grow within that,” he says. “Seeing them talk about their issues in the context of their heritage. Seeing that cultural growth. I know that means they are learning who they truly are.”

## **QUICK REFERENCE: A HERITAGE-FOCUSED MENTORING APPROACH**

**Relationship-Based Model**  
Group mentoring

**Youth focus**  
Indigenous persons

**Major Practices**  
Infusion of cultural traditions  
Small groups  
Sharing circles

**Socioemotional skills  
and success assets**  
Self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, peer identity, agency

**Mentors**  
Professional staff

**Reach**  
Regional

**Community**  
Urban

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