

Promoting First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Youth Wellbeing through Culturally-Relevant Programming: The Role of Cultural Connectedness and Identity

Claire Crooks¹, Dawn Burleigh², and Ashley Sisco³

1 Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario

2 University of Lethbridge

3 White Buffalo Consulting

Abstract:

Objectives: Although culturally relevant programming has been identified as a promising practice for promoting resiliency among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) youth, the specific ways in which these programs contribute to wellbeing are unclear. The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programs include an array of strengths-based culturally relevant programs for FNMI youth that have been found to increase wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to explore how culturally relevant programming provides a forum for intrapersonal and interpersonal growth.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 adult FNMI community and education stakeholders who have had extensive involvement with the programs. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with an inductive approach through the use of open-coding.

Results: Two themes emerged to clarify the relationships between culturally relevant programming and youth wellbeing. The two interconnected themes were the importance of identity and belonging, and the role of cultural connectedness in promoting wellbeing among FNMI youth.

Conclusion: Culturally relevant programming provides a powerful opportunity for youth to develop their personal sense of positive cultural identity and feelings of belonging. In addition, the sense of connection to culture was seen to have a direct positive impact on youth, partly through combatting shame.

Implication: Culturally relevant programs such as those described in this article have the potential to increase youth wellbeing and resiliency by increasing sense of identity, belonging, and connection to culture. These opportunities may be particularly important in the school setting, where historically cultural identity was suppressed, leading to experiences of shame.

Keywords:

Aboriginal youth, wellbeing, violence prevention, program evaluation, cultural connectedness, identity, relationships, partnerships.

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Introduction

In Canada, the federal and provincial/territorial governments as well as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) governments and communities have called for strengths-based, culturally relevant programming for FNMI youth that fosters identity development and engages FNMI worldviews to promote wellbeing (Assembly of First Nations, 2012; Auditor General of Canada, 2000; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). To address this need, the Fourth R team has enhanced its evidence-based programming over the past decade to meet the needs of FNMI youth. The Fourth R is an evidence-based violence prevention program that was developed by a team of educators and researchers (Wolfe et al., 2009). The primary objectives of the original Fourth R program are the promotion of healthy relationships and the prevention of violence and risk related behaviors among adolescents. The Fourth R has been shown to decrease dating violence and increase condom use (Wolfe et al., 2009), increase peer resistance skills (Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, Hughes, & Ellis, 2012), and decrease peer violence among maltreated youth (Crooks, Scott, Ellis, & Wolfe, 2011). The healthy relationships and skills focus of Fourth R programming are strong foundations for all youth; however, many enhancements were needed to make it more culturally relevant for FNMI youth. The resulting programs, known as Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations¹ programs for FNMI youth, include: a cultural leadership and healthy relationship courses, a cultural leadership camp, transition conferences, two mentoring programs, and an FNMI student advisory committee (see Appendix A for a Description of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program components).

¹ For brevity, the "Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations" for FNMI youth will henceforth be referred to as the "Fourth R". The "original Fourth R" will be used to distinguish the general Fourth R program from that which is FNMI specific.

The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program applies an FNMI-informed framework to the original Fourth R program's best practices. Specifically, it expanded the original classroom-based curriculum by engaging FNMI Elders and community members as resources in the program, utilizing culturally relevant teaching methods (such as storytelling and the use of a talking circle), and interweaving local traditional teachings about wellness and relationships to promote positive youth development. Furthermore, the programs are explicitly contextualized to identify the negative impacts of colonialism (for example, highlighting how the intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools has contributed to high rates of substance misuse in some communities). In addition to developing culturally relevant versions of school-based curricula, the team has developed additional mentoring and culture camp programs specific to FNMI youth. All of the programs were developed in partnership with FNMI educators, community partners, and youth, and have been revised based on systematically gathered feedback from stakeholders.

A strengths-based approach is increasingly recognized as integral to FNMI youth programming, consistent with the holistic view of wellness prevalent among many FNMI cultures. A strengths-based approach also nuances violence, mental health concerns, social inequities, and poverty within a colonial discourse that acknowledges the role of individual resiliency in coping with historical trauma (Greenwood & DeLeeuw, 2012; Mussell, Cardiff, & White, 2004). Ultimately, it makes historical trauma and ongoing inequities visible, encourages a broader conceptualization of youth adjustment and mental health, and moves programming toward an understanding of resiliency and protective factors rather than adversity and risk factors.

Consistent with a strength-based approach, cultural connectedness is considered a key protective factor in FNMI youth mental health (Goldston, et al., 2008; Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2013; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFromboise, 2001) and wellbeing. Specifically, it has been identified as a unique protective factor for preventing violence among Native American youth (Pridemore, 2004) and is associated with several indicators of wellbeing (Snowshoe et al., 2014). A sense of culture, history, and identity are particularly important for FNMI youth because of issues associated with colonization and historical loss (Wexler, 2009). The term "cultural resilience" is frequently used to denote the role that culture may play as a resource for resilience in the individual (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). However, culture as strength has also been conceptualized as a community-level resilience factor, notably in the prevention of suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Lalonde, 2005). The Fourth R programs foster cultural connectedness through localized and place-based curriculum that engages local community members, including Elders, to centralize Indigenous knowledge and promote FNMI cultural identity development.

A multi-method, multi-stakeholder evaluation of Fourth R programming for FNMI youth found that participants experienced a number of benefits including improved relationships and an increased sense of belonging, increased leadership skills and confidence, and improved student success (Crooks et al., 2015). This same study highlighted the importance of the culture-based aspects of programming. In addition, longitudinal research has demonstrated that compared to youth not involved in mentoring, participants

demonstrated greater emotional wellbeing and sense of cultural identity, following the transition to secondary school (Crooks, Exner-Cortens, Lapointe, Burm, & Chiodo, 2015). The purpose of this article is to further explore how the Fourth R promotes a positive sense of identity and cultural connectedness and, in turn, promotes wellbeing among FNMI youth. First, this article provides the program's background, including the partnership process. Second, it provides an overview of the case study methodology, results, and discussion. Third, it concludes with a summary of the findings, implications, and areas for future research.

Program background and partnership process

In 2004, a large school board approached the Fourth R team to discuss developing programming specifically for FNMI youth. The school board has a mixed rural/urban/First Nations catchment area. Its FNMI population includes urban students as well as students who transition from federally funded schools in their communities after grade 6 or grade 8. The Fourth R began working with the board and the three local First Nations communities to develop and evaluate school-based, culturally relevant, relationship-focused programming for FNMI youth.

The Fourth R team's first project, developed in collaboration with an advisory committee of educators and community members, for this FNMI specific program enhancement was a video highlighting positive relationship skills and responses to peer pressure developed for and by FNMI youth. The advisory committee highlighted the transition from elementary school to secondary school (which occurred between grade 8 and 9) as a particularly difficult transition for many FNMI youth, and indicated a need for programming on either side of that transition. The team has since co-developed, implemented, and evaluated a range of program components for FNMI youth in Ontario between grades 7 and 12. The programming referred to in this case study includes two components for senior elementary students (i.e., elementary mentoring program and grade 8 transition conferences) and three for secondary students (i.e., peer mentoring, cultural leadership course, and culture leadership camp). These program components are described briefly in Appendix A. More information about programs is available at www.youthrelationships.org.

Although these programs vary by format and focus, they share important features in that they utilize culturally appropriate teaching methods; promote cultural connectedness and identity, emphasize community inclusion; prioritize mentoring approaches; and, include cultural, historical, and contemporary content, as described below.

Culturally appropriate teaching methods

All of the programs utilize more culturally relevant teaching strategies than the original Fourth R. For example, students begin the Elementary Mentoring Program, by learning the Creation Story, as shared by a local storyteller. Within the Aboriginal Perspectives Fourth R course a narrative called Jana's Story follows the challenges and resiliency of a young girl facing family, school, and systemic challenges. The story is broken into mini-chapters with discussion questions focused on the choices and challenges Jana faces at each step. In

addition to written format, the story is available in an audio track dictated by a First Nations Research Assistant to accommodate the importance of oral histories. Teaching methods have been adapted to include the use of sharing circles, which provide a culturally relevant means to facilitate discussion.

Community inclusion

The inclusion of community members who share their teachings and experience in culturally relevant ways is another format change that has enriched the program. Community members are invited into the Aboriginal Perspectives (Grade 9) course, and Elders, community leaders, and academic experts are invited to share traditional and contemporary teachings at the Cultural Leadership Camp. Previous guests have spoken to students attending the cultural leadership camp about traditional medicines, discussed personal cultural identity, shared traditional drum making, and lead a drum waking ceremony.

Mentoring

Another format change has been the overarching emphasis on mentoring. Mentoring is a culturally appropriate and effective way to support healthy relationship development for FNMI youth, particularly when mentors share a cultural background with mentees (Klinck et al., 2005). Although peer and adult mentors may play different roles, both are recognized as protective influences in the lives of youth (LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Pridemore, 2004). In addition to the two mentoring programs, mentoring is built into the Cultural Leadership Course, and opportunities for mentors to teach younger students in other contexts are offered through the transition conferences, where mentors can facilitate sessions.

Cultural, historical, and contemporary content

Content adaptations include the addition of locally relevant cultural teachings, traditions, historical contexts, and content that reflect FNMI realities. The Elementary Mentoring Program is now based upon the local founding teachings of the Medicine Wheel, Great Law of Peace, and Seven Grandfathers. In the Aboriginal Perspectives Fourth R curriculum, psycho-historical, socio-economic, and health related trends among FNMI peoples are explained in the context of colonial history. For example, the risk behaviors observed in many FNMI communities are explained as a result of intergenerational trauma due to residential schools experience. Moreover, the focus on programming for grade 7 and 8 students to smooth the transition from elementary to high school was strategically chosen because this time remains a particular challenge for many FNMI students, especially those students moving from an elementary school on the reserve to an urban secondary school.

The present study focuses on examining the role of cultural identity and connectedness in the programs specifically, and broadens the perspective beyond youth to include other stakeholders at the community and school level, including FNMI counselors, teachers, Elders, program facilitators, and community members involved in program development and implementation.

Methods

This qualitative case study utilized semi-structured interviews with adults with deep knowledge about cultural identity, FNMI youth, and the Fourth R programs. Consistent with an inductive approach to qualitative inquiry, the focus remained on exploration, understanding, and discovery. This research focuses on participant voices and program experiences rather than a particular theoretical position (Patton, 2002). The Research Ethics Board at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) approved this study.

Participants

The researchers used purposeful sampling to identify and recruit stakeholders for this study who had close partnerships with the program, including: Elders, teachers, First Nation counselors, school board staff members, and community members. Many participants held a combination of these roles and had been extensively involved with the local FNMI community and school board for numerous years. All of the individuals invited to contribute to this project participated in interviews. In total, interviews were conducted with 12 participants (3 male and 9 female). Five participants were employed as educators, FNMI counsellors, and/or advisors by the school board (collectively identified as educators in results). Two participants were program facilitators (identified as such in results). The remaining five participants were community members (including Elders, nurses, social workers, and mentors) who contributed to program development and implementation in different capacities (identified as community partners in the results section). Participants were given a \$25 gift card as an honorarium for their time and contribution. The interviews ranged in duration from one to two and a half hours. A researcher who had not been directly involved with the programming conducted all interviews in order to foster an interview environment conducive to open and authentic participant feedback and input.

Procedure

A researcher conducted and audio recorded semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995) using a general interview guide (See Appendix B). The interview protocol included a number of general questions that addressed issues of program involvement, partnership experiences, and program perceptions as well as program specific questions about strengths, areas of improvement, challenges, and limitations. The interviewer used a flexible approach that allowed the dialogue to emerge from the setting, context, and individuals involved (Patton, 2002). This allowed the interviewer to capture in-context data and accommodate the various roles, responsibilities, and levels of involvement of the research participants. The interview process included two stages of member checking. Interview participants were provided with electronic copies of their transcribed audio-recorded interviews to add, remove, or amend their responses. In addition, once the specific quotes were selected for the paper, they were given a second opportunity to approve the inclusion of these passages.

Data analysis

Consistent with a qualitative case study approach, the researchers utilized an inductive approach to data analysis that maintains focus on patterns, categories, and themes in the data (Patton, 2002). Specifically, the research team used thematic content analysis to systematically capture nuance in rich data (Creswell, 2003; Stemler, 2001) by open-coding transcribed interviews. Open-coding involved recognizing and coding themes as they emerge as opposed to imposing preconceived categories (Patton, 2002).

Results

Three themes emerged from the 12 interviews; one theme addressed the nature of the partnerships among stakeholders and partners and will be explored in another article. The other two interconnected themes that are the focus of this article, include the role of: 1) identity and belonging, and 2) cultural connectedness in promoting wellbeing among FNMI youth (see Figure 1). These themes will be discussed by highlighting participant voices to emphasize their perceptions and understandings of the program.

Figure 1. Interconnections between cultural connectedness and cultural identity development. Graphic by Jamie Duncan, 2014.



Cultural identity development

The researchers identified the theme of cultural identity in participant interviews as student relational knowing of oneself, confidence, sense of belonging and engagement, and leadership. Several participants referred to the program's role in helping FNMI youth to 'know themselves' and linked this with improved self-esteem and confidence. For example, community stakeholders identified authenticity of the program as important to fostering a strong and positive sense of identity among FNMI youth. One participant explained that the program allowed students to embrace their cultural identities while learning.

I just think that they should be themselves when they are learning. The reason they remember the drum (a culture camp experience) so much is because it's who they are. You know when you're learning curriculum you are learning it as yourself, you are learning it as the person that you are and allowed to be. When you're struggling with your identity and trying to learn, you've got a problem. You're wondering who the heck you are, especially in high school. (Male community partner #2)

Participants also mentioned that the Fourth R combats the marginalization of FNMI youth within mainstream school settings by providing them with increased comfort and a sense of belonging. Specifically, participants stated that the program makes FNMI students feel "they are a part of the school" (Male community partner #2; female community partner #3; female program facilitator #1) and understand that they do not have to compromise their identities to learn. Another participant explained that the program offered FNMI youth both the space and time to explore their identities.

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 #4)

Moreover, participants explained that the program increased FNMI students' sense of comfort and belonging. For example, one participant reflected on making hand drums in culture camp with other FNMI students as an opportunity to connect with FNMI peers through a spiritually significant experience that was at one time against the law, along with other ceremonial and cultural practices, under the Indian Act.

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 #2)

Figure 2. Students making hand drums at the cultural leadership camp.



This increased sense of belonging also increased student engagement beyond the programming. That is, the belonging that was nurtured in the programs provided a solid foundation and confidence for further success in the broader school context.

When it is just First Nations kids they are more comfortable so having this space for them to come and do mentoring is important. There is just that comfort level and also a lot of the kids are coming into the school and don't know any other kids so they are more comfortable they are doing something with their friends and often it is just getting them set up and then later on they are joining other activities. (Female educator #2)

Attendance certainly has improved. From our mentors that we had over the years we have had strong kids that have won huge awards, we had a valedictorian a senior student that started as a mentor that was the first [First Nations valedictorian] in

100 years at [school name] and that was huge and we certainly saw that with the kids it was making them feel good about being at school and getting involved with sports and the various opportunities at each of the schools. Our student population has really grown to be more visible in the schools. You know certainly this program has gotten our kids more out of their shells. (Female educator #1)

Participants said that the program fostered leadership opportunities that are central to student identity. Participants reported that prior to the Fourth R, FNMI students were not assuming leadership roles in the school setting. However, Fourth R has encouraged FNMI students to increasingly assume these roles and develop their identities as leaders.

I have seen a lot of positive things come from students who are in Fourth R who are either shy or wouldn't get involved in too many things but they really opened up when Fourth R came into the school and gave them a chance to lead themselves during their Fourth R meetings and that really opened them up to get involved and socialize and make new friends and so it was a positive thing. (Male community partner #4)

Participants who worked directly with students in Fourth R programming as teachers, facilitators, and counselors identified that leadership opportunities that began in the Fourth R often extended into the school community, where students' capacity as leaders transferred into new opportunities beyond the program.

There are students that you saw in grade 9 and Fourth R is the first thing that they ever got involved in at school 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 Nation groups. For example, this year one of our former mentors from Fourth R is the co-president of the school. So it has really been nice to see the kids get involved, they are committed, and that group are leading the way and in the last 2 years we have had the highest graduation numbers for First Nation students in years. (Female educator #2)

Yesterday we had a health fair and students who led the fair weren't our student council president or top leaders in the school. It was Fourth R kids who don't typically get the chance to lead so I can see and correlate that to the Fourth R and how it gives them a chance to take the leadership role. (Female educator #2)

I see kids from Fourth R programming this year in the schools, who have grown and matured and so greatly took pride and ownership in something. The kids identify themselves as mentors and then go to conferences where they can stand in front of an audience and talk where they wouldn't have been able to do that in a large group before Fourth R. The students get really excited about it, which is great to see. They have become true leaders not just among their FNMI peers, but among all of their peers. (Female educator #4)

Participants also noted that the development of leadership skills was a central objective for building community capacity, because this offered students the option to take on leadership positions within their own communities.

Cultural connectedness

The theme of cultural connectedness emerged through interviews to include stakeholders' perceptions of FNMI student identity, pride, and mentoring as well as culturally-specific program components. Cultural connectedness is linked with identity and sense of belonging. Specifically, participant data suggest that cultural connectedness enhances students' sense of identity.

I think... [cultural connectedness of the Fourth R]...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 #4)

Stakeholders framed FNMI pride as a counter-action to the shame so often expressed in relation to Canada's colonial history, including the residential school experience and other educational assimilative policies (Czyzewski, 2012). One community member explained that FNMI students often struggle with shame associated with colonization and that the Fourth R's cultural activities build cultural pride important to eliminating this shame, "Pride isn't the issue it was shame... Without the opportunity to go to the Fourth R culture camp, that would be one less opportunity that a young person had to experience themselves, to experience their pride". (Male community partner #2).

A school board staff member explained that the historical context the Fourth R provides also allows students to overcome shame and embrace pride.

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 #5)

The cultural pride that the Fourth R encourages in FNMI youth, through fostering cultural connectedness, is also a protective factor for students experiencing racism. One facilitator explained that this is why she became involved with the Fourth R.

So that is why I work with the Fourth R. I want the students to be able to stand up for themselves because I know that racism happens and it will happen so I want them to have the skills, the Fourth R relationships skills but also the background of Native pride and why there shouldn't be racism against Native people. (Female program facilitator #2)

Participants also stated that the program's mentoring components foster cultural connectedness in FNMI youth through relational knowing within and across communities. Specifically, they stated that mentoring relationships provide cultural connection through role modeling and establishing opportunities for students to see themselves as confident in successful leadership positions.

... mentoring is this huge piece of the program where you can see kids from your community that are in positions of leadership. That is very powerful because that is sending an example and it's showing you that, 'hey that person is my neighbor and I know where they come from and if I can see them in that role I can see myself in that role.' At the secondary level kids have a lot of influence over other kids so I think mentoring is a huge piece right there. You see some amazing leadership. You see some articulate students at the secondary level, students that are now going off to college with really high aspirations. Through the Fourth R they have cultural models that started when they were in elementary school and they work their way up and it builds confidence and capacity in students. (Female educator #3)

Participants also linked cultural connectedness with the specific cultural components of the programming. Teachers, community members, and counselors alike identified the valuable cultural opportunities youth have through Fourth R programming.

...the Fourth R focus a lot on the Native culture aspect...They focus a lot on the circle aspect which we all do the circle. So they focus on what is common and that might be the smudging. I really like that culture is being brought into the program because some of the schools aren't even doing that themselves. So allowing the kids to get back to their roots and identify who they are as an Aboriginal person is something I think that draws them to that program because the youth get to say, 'hey this is me, I am Aboriginal.' The Fourth R is coming in here to the school and they are reinforcing... pride. (Female educator #4)

Another participant spoke to the bicultural competency the program fosters in teaching students that they do not have to compromise their culture or educational success.

If you're an honours 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, #3)

Discussion and Implications

The results of this study found that adult stakeholder perspectives of the program are consistent with other student-based research that indicates that the Fourth R's strengths-based, culturally relevant approach promotes a positive sense of identity and cultural connectedness among youth. The inclusion of adult stakeholders' voices who have been engaged in this program and/or with the youth involved in this program added an important perspective to this work. Adult stakeholders tend to have unique insights into program effectiveness from a programming perspective, based on involvement and observation of

other programs over a longer time period compared with students. They also lend added insights into the trends observed in programming impacts on students over time. In addition, they can compare the experience of students with whom they are working to their own past experiences as students in schools.

A unique contribution of the adult voices included in this study was the identification of shame as a compelling negative influence in the lives of youth, and the potential for culturally relevant programming to combat shame. It is possible that youth do not identify shame as such because of the internalized nature of the experience, and it is only with the passage of time and distance that adults are able to name it. The opportunity for pride-inducing cultural activities in the school setting is particularly powerful, because it helps to disrupt the negative legacy of colonialism, within which the education system has been a force of systematic cultural annihilation and trauma (Elias et al., 2012). By starting to name and identify the impacts of colonialism, youth may begin the process of externalizing the experience that they could otherwise perceive as shame, and begin to combat the negative impacts of historical loss (Whitbeck, Walls, Johnson, Morrisseau, & McDougall, 2009).

Although adding the perspective of knowledgeable adult informants helps build a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of our programming, this study was not without limitations. The primary limitation is the potential sample bias, as participants were adults who know the program well and are invested in it. For example, some participants were involved in developing or revising program components and others have facilitated the mentoring program or participated in the culture camp. The participants are truly partners in the Fourth R rather than arm's length observers. Individuals who question the approach of culture-enhancing activities (versus, for example, anti-oppression work) might see the impact of the programming differently.

This study highlights the importance of both cultural connectedness and cultural identity development as important sources of resiliency for FNMI youth. Furthermore, these are resiliency factors that can be fostered through culturally relevant, strengths-based programming in schools. The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program takes a strength-based approach by engaging with and promoting FNMI cultures and encouraging cultural identity formation and pride rather than focusing on deficits. The Fourth R contextualizes deficits (e.g., violence, mental health concerns, social inequities, and poverty) within a colonial discourse that acknowledges FNMI agency and resiliency (Mussell, Cardiff, & White, 2004). Through this strengths-based focus on culture, both individual and community resiliency are fostered. The results of this study demonstrate that cultural connectedness and identity development are inextricably linked to one another through the common aspects they share and reinforce one another. As highlighted by the participants of this study, increasing cultural connectedness through culturally relevant programming is enjoyable for youth; furthermore, it has the potential to transform the way they see themselves as students and leaders, and set the stage for future success.

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Appendix A: Description of Fourth R: United Our Nations program components

Component	Description	Grade	Duration	Facilitators
Elementary mentoring program	Groups of students are mentored by two young adult mentors. Structured program includes healthy relationship skills development and cultural activities, situated in the local founding teachings of the Medicine Wheel, and Seven Grandfather teachings.	7/8	Weekly for 18 weeks	Young adult First Nations mentors
Grade 8 Transition conferences	Full day conference to provide grade 8 youth with information and resources to promote a successful transition to high school. Focus on connecting youth to older mentors and resources. Guest speakers share cultural knowledge, support, guidance, and thoughts on identity.	8	Full day; held twice annually	Community mentors; educators; grade 11-12 youth
Peer mentoring program	Pairs or small groups of youth engage in mentoring activities, with a focus of connecting the mentee to an older youth who is a positive role model and who has made a strong commitment to school. Adult community mentors provide occasional teaching activities to the group of mentors and mentees.	9-12	Weekly during lunch for the course of the school year	Grades 10-12 youth; Community mentors
Cultural Leadership Course	Stacked course (i.e., students in the same classroom working on one of two credits) that offers a Peer Leadership credit to older students and a General Study Skills credit to younger students. Mentoring activities are built into the curriculum to enhance relationships among older and younger cohorts.	9 and 11	Regular course schedule for one semester	Teacher; older youth play mentor role
Cultural Leadership Camp	Intensive off-site retreat that brings together FNMI students to engage in cultural teachings (such as drum making), develop leadership skills, and promote healthy relationships	9, 10, 11	Three days intensive	Young adult mentors; community mentors

Appendix B: Interview guide

Clarifying language	As I mentioned, this interview is part of a project looking at the experiences of Aboriginal youth, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit. We know that some people use the term Aboriginal, others use terms such as Native, and others prefer their specific Nation. What term are you most comfortable using? (Whatever term they provide gets used in the interview).
Program expenses and involvement	1. Can you tell me about your experiences and involvement with the Fourth R? 2. How does your position with the school board interact or support the Fourth R?
Program perceptions	3. What are your perceptions of the Fourth R program? 4. What do you think are the strengths of the Fourth R program? 5. What has been the greatest impact of Fourth R for you? 6. Is there anything about the program you think should be changed? 7. Is there anything you think should be added to the program? 8. In your opinion what could the school board do to further support Aboriginal students? 9. Looking forward, what do you think the Fourth R should be doing next? 10. In terms of the facilitators for the Fourth R, what qualities do you think are important for them to have? What makes a great facilitator? 11. What have been your experiences with students who are in the Fourth R program? 12. Do you see any limitations or challenges for Aboriginal students to fully engage with their school experience?
Cultural connectedness	13. What role does or can cultural connectedness play for students in school? 14. How can teachers better support a student's connection to their culture? 15. In your opinion, what other activities, supports or changes would make school experiences more positive for Aboriginal students.
Additional comments	That is the end of my specific questions. Is there anything else you want to add? (NO FURTHER COMMENTS – TURN OFF RECORDER)