Western
Centre for School
Mental Health

Research Snapshot

Culturally relevant school-based programming for FNMI youth: Improved relationships, confidence, leadership and school success

What is this research about?

First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) youth across Canada struggle to thrive in the current education system. However, a growing body of research suggests that FNMI youth experience better adjustment and greater academic success when involved in strengths-based, culturally relevant educational programming.

The Fourth R Uniting Our Nations programs are designed to promote positive youth development within a culturally appropriate framework. In partnership with local Elders and community members, Uniting Our Nations programs utilize locally relevant cultural teachings to support healthy relationships skills, and strengthen cultural connectedness and identity among FNMI students. The study is an initial descriptive evaluation of the program, examining perceived benefits in healthy relationships and cultural connectedness among FNMI youth.

"Mentors are showing other kids that you can succeed and still be Aboriginal. That's the key; it's showing kids they don't have to lose who they are in order to be successful. We are not asking you to assimilate or give up everything in order to succeed. We know that you can keep connected to your culture and success."
-Educator

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used a mixed-methods, case study design to descriptively evaluate the Uniting Our Nations program.

What you need to know:

This study evaluated the Fourth R Uniting Our Nations, a school-based, culturally relevant program for FNMI youth. Results highlighted multiple positive impacts of the program. Participants reported that involvement in the program contributed to increased student success, improved relationships, gains in confidence and leadership skills, and fostered a sense of belonging and cultural identity.

There were 87 participants in the study, including elementary and secondary school students, educators, and administrators from 15 schools in a large schoolboard in southwestern Ontario. Forty-seven secondary school students (53% male) between the ages of 14 and 19 years (average age= 16.10) completed surveys regarding the their experiences with the program, and overall impacts associated with participation.

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with elementary ($n = 28$) and secondary ($n = 7$) students, two administrators, and five Aboriginal educators. Participants were asked about specific experiences pertaining to program involvement, perceived impacts of the program, and program strengths and challenges.

What did the researchers find?

Researchers identified four themes from both survey responses and interviews that highlighted the positive impacts of the program. Both student and adult stakeholders identified each benefit, unless otherwise noted:

Programming contributed to school success:

- Students felt supported, and better able to deal with school-based challenges
- Increases in prosocial student involvement in the school community
- Reductions in suspensions and bullying (reported by administrators)
- Higher graduation rates among FNMI students (reported by educators)

Students developed improved relationships and sense of belonging:

- Students reported feeling an increased sense of belonging and comfort at school
- Students were able to meet new friends and establish positive, healthy relationships
- Improved healthy relationship and communication skills
- Increased school-based connections and involvement in school

Students gain confidence and leadership skills:

- Students reported increased confidence in voicing their opinions and getting involved at school
- Increased opportunities to use and develop leadership skills
- Students reported feeling pride, and increased positive self-concept as a result of leadership opportunities and mentoring experiences

Culturally relevant experiences are key to program success:

- Students reported feeling more connected to their culture, and valued the opportunity to learn and share cultural knowledge with family/friends
- Strengthened cultural identity
- Importance of enhancing cultural connectedness to foster academic success

How can you use this research?

This research suggests that culturally relevant programming can promote numerous positive outcomes and contribute to academic success among FNMI youth. Fostering a sense of belonging, and cultural connectedness, as well as providing opportunities to build prosocial relationships and develop leadership skills was associated with multiple indicators of student success in this study. Thus, culturally relevant programming delivered in the school setting is an important strategy for promoting positive wellbeing and future educational success for FNMI youth.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Crooks, C. V., Burleigh, D., Snowshoe, A., Lapp, A., Hughes, R., & Sisco, A. (2015). A case study of culturally relevant school-based programming for First Nations youth: Improved relationships, confidence and leadership, and school success. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, *8*(4), 216-230.

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About this Summary: This summary was written by Caely Dunlop, Ph.D. Candidate at Western University. For further information about Western's Centre for School Mental Health, visit **www.edu.uwo.ca/csmh**.

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