



Research Snapshot

Two years of school-based, culturally relevant mentoring promotes positive mental health for FNMI youth



What you need to know:

This study examined the effects of participation in a school-based, culturally relevant mentoring program on wellbeing among FNMI youth. Researchers found that adolescents who participated in 2 years of relationship-focused mentoring reported better mental health and more positive cultural identity than peers who did not participate in the program. Youth described intrapersonal and interpersonal growth, increased cultural knowledge and development of healthy relationships skills as benefits of program participation.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the Uniting Our Nations mentoring program on the wellbeing of FNMI youth. Specifically, this study examined whether two years of mentoring, as compared to one year, or no mentoring participation, was associated with benefits for participants.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers followed 105 FNMI students in grades 7 and 8 from a large school board in southwestern Ontario over a two year period between 2011-2013. The researchers used a mixed methods design to evaluate the program, collecting data from surveys and interviews with youth participants.

Survey data were collected at three “waves” during the study (2011, 2012, 2013), where youth completed annual self-report questionnaires.

What is this research about?

First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) youth experience disproportionately high rates of negative health outcomes, including poor psychological wellbeing. Recent research has identified culturally specific protective factors that promote resilience and buffer against adverse outcomes for these youth. Cultural connectedness, or the extent to which an individual feels connected to their culture, and a strong, positive cultural identity are increasingly recognized as key components of effective programming for FNMI adolescents. Mentoring programs have also emerged as a promising strategy, offering a venue for fostering strong, positive relationships, in a culturally supportive context.

“Overall, this exploratory study demonstrated that culturally relevant mentoring for FNMI youth of sufficient duration has the potential to increase well-being, as indexed by positive mental health and cultural identity, and demonstrated that these effects may be related to intrapersonal and interpersonal growth, as well as learning about healthy relationships and culture...”

The Uniting Our Nations mentoring program for FNMI youth prioritizes the development of positive relationships within a culturally relevant, strengths-based framework. The program operates at both the elementary and secondary school levels, emphasizing healthy relationship skill-building, and fostering cultural connectedness and identity through cultural teachings and content. Elementary youth are mentored on a weekly basis by First Nations young adults, and secondary school youth engage in a peer mentoring relationship between younger (grade 9) and older (Grades 10-12) students.

Mentoring participation was also assessed at each wave. Students in the sample fell into three categories based on mentoring status: two years of mentoring ($n= 17$), one year of mentoring ($n= 19$) or did not participate in mentoring ($n=63$).

Researchers also interviewed all youth who were involved in mentoring during the first year of the study ($n= 28$) to obtain descriptive feedback about their experiences with the program.

What did the researchers find?

Findings indicated that youth who participated in two years of the mentoring program reported significantly better mental health, and greater positive cultural identity, as compared to youth who participated in one or no years. In addition, preliminary findings suggested that participation in two years of mentoring was associated with higher credit accumulation. Analysis of gender differences in program effects suggested that two years of program participation had a specific positive impact for girls.

Youth who participated in two years of the mentoring program described many positive impacts they experienced as a result of program participation. Researchers identified three overarching themes in the gains highlighted in youth interviews:

- **Intrapersonal-** The program enhanced youth's self-confidence, affirmed their cultural backgrounds, and helped them embrace their individuality.
- **Interpersonal-** The mentoring framework created opportunities for youth to build a network of support in their school community. Youth developed and strengthened meaningful peer relationships, and formed close bonds with program facilitators.
- **Cultural learning-** The program provided opportunities for students to learn about their culture, and connect cultural teachings with their life experiences both in and out of school.
- **Healthy relationships learning-** The knowledge and skills youth learned in the program were applicable to real-life situations. Students were able to identify ways to use positive communication and healthy relationship strategies from the program in their daily lives.

photo credit: CC license Floyd Davidson

How can you use this research?

The results of this study suggest that participation in school-based, culturally relevant mentoring increased wellbeing among FNMI youth. Findings highlight the need for programming to be of sufficient duration and focus on building strong relationships, to maximize benefits for participants. These findings add to a growing research base that supports the importance of strengths-based, culturally relevant programming as an effective strategy for mitigating risk, and promoting positive outcomes for this population.

Original Research Article:

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

Crooks, C. V., Exner-Cortens, D., Burm, S., Lapointe, A., & Chiodo, D. (2016). Two years of relationship-focused mentoring for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit adolescents: Promoting positive mental health. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 1-18. doi:10.1007/s10935-016-0457-0

About the Authors:

Claire Crooks, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Western University. **Deinera Exner-Cortens**, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. **Sarah Burm**, PhD Candidate, Western University, **Alicia Lapointe**, PhD Candidate and Instructor, Western University, **Debbie Chiodo**, Program Consultant- Provincial System Support Program, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and Research Associate, Centre for School Mental Health, Western University.

Keywords: Aboriginal youth, Mental health, Wellbeing, Cultural connectedness, Cultural identity, Culturally relevant programming, Healthy relationships

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.



This research snapshot is also available on the OERE website.