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## A Mixed Methods Exploration of Benefits for Youth Mentors in an Indigenous High School Peer Mentoring Program

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Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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### **Abstract**

This mixed methods case study investigated the benefits of serving as a youth mentor to younger peers as part of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Peer Mentoring Program. Data were collected from 11 youth mentors via interviews and returned to them for interpretation and meaning-making through a statement sorting activity as part of a larger concept mapping procedure. The concept mapping was created through Concept Systems, and traditional thematic analysis of the data were conducted with Dedoose. The concept mapping revealed three themes: 1) Cultural Connections, 2) Benefits to Self, and 3) Relationships with Family and Friends. As part of the thematic analysis, open-coding was used to analyze each transcript, from which four root codes were derived: 1) Contributions, 2) Relationships, 3) Culture, and 4) Aspirations. The findings indicated that mentors identified the program's cultural relevancy, such as participation in cultural practices, connecting with their Indigenous peers in a group setting, and exploring their cultural identities, as the biggest benefit in their roles mentoring their younger peers. Other benefits reported by mentors included perceived intrapersonal (i.e. self-perception, self-confidence, relationship with self) and interpersonal (i.e. relationships with others, self-advocacy skills) gains as a result of their participation in the program, as well as improved connection to school. This study contributes to strengths-based research that supports Indigenous youth development, cultural engagement and leadership potential.

Key words: Youth mentoring, Indigenous youth, cultural programming, youth engagement, Indigenous leadership

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## A Mixed Methods Exploration of Benefits for Youth Mentors in an Indigenous High School Peer Mentoring Program

### **Introduction**

People within community organizations and the education system are using culturally-based programming to engage Indigenous youth in leadership roles and provide opportunities to reconnect with their traditional cultural identities as well as promote general well being. Indigenous peoples and their allies are preserving and promoting their cultures (Rose & Giles, 2007) with concern that, “If we become disconnected, we lose the ability to make meaning from Indigenous stories” (Archibald, 2008, p. ix). Canadian schools are more frequently demonstrating student inclusivity by providing platforms for cultural programming, such as Indigenous study courses and language instruction. Further, some schools offer culturally relevant programming, like Indigenous peer mentoring programs, as a means to engage students in their schooling and encourage continued participation in formal education. Programs that engage Indigenous youth within the school system encourage a connection to school while providing opportunities to explore relationships with themselves, each other, community Elders, and their traditional cultures. The purpose of this study was to investigate the benefits perceived by youth who were mentors to younger peers in a structured Indigenous high school peer mentoring program. In the introduction, I begin by providing a Canadian historical context that provides insight into the inequities experienced by Indigenous peoples living in Canada. Further, I provide a broad description of Indigenous worldviews that increasingly support the focus of programming to re-engage Indigenous youth and connect them with their cultural traditions. The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program is an example of a school-based and culturally focussed program and is the focus of this study.

**Historical Context of Colonization**

Assimilative colonization practices imposed by the Canadian government have displaced not only Indigenous peoples in Canada, but also their cultural worldviews (Archibald, 2008; Knudtson & Suzuki, 2006; Rose & Giles 2007; Zimmerman, Ramirez, Washienko, Walter, & Dyer, 1998). The Canadian residential schooling system was part of a systemic plan implemented by the federal government to displace and eliminate Indigenous cultures, languages, attire, and spiritual beliefs (Blackstock, Clarke, Cullen, D'Hondt, & Formsma, 2004; Gunn, Pomahac, Striker, & Tailfeathers, 2011; The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), 2015). Many Indigenous families have experienced a disconnect from their cultural traditions and identities stemming from the Canadian residential school legacy, where children were not raised by their families, in their communities, and within their cultures (TRC, 2015). Intergenerational effects of family disruption continue to be evident (Bisanz, Cardinal, da Costa, Gibson, Klinck, & Woodard, 2003; Klinck, Cardinal, Edwards, Gibson, Bisanz, & da Costa, 2005; TRC, 2015) and are demonstrated by the disproportionate rates of poverty, substance use, youth suicide, youth justice, child welfare, and violence experienced by Indigenous families living in and off reserves (Blackstock et al., 2004; TRC, 2015).

The legacy of residential schooling has resulted in a mistrust of the education system in Indigenous communities. Western-oriented educational practices, grown from policies that regarded Indigenous peoples as racially and culturally inferior (Parent, 2011), are oppressive to Indigenous identities (TRC, 2015). Oppressive educational practices continue to be evident in current classroom structures, teaching styles, and assessment methods with little evidence of Indigenous content or inclusion in curriculum and programming (Blackstock et al., 2004; Gunn et al., 2011). The resulting marginalization of Indigenous students in the school system is just



one of the contributors that can lead to feelings of inferiority in the classroom and result in passive learning (Gunn et al., 2011). For example, experiences of racism at school are well documented and contribute to these negative outcomes (Blackstock et al., 2004; Parent, 2011). Further, these experiences contribute to low rates of academic success and graduation (Statistics Canada, 2015; Stockdale, Parsons, & Beauchamp, 2013; TRC, 2015). Data from the 2011 Canadian National Household Survey reporting on secondary school graduation rates revealed 40% of First Nations students living on reserve graduated high school, compared to a 70% graduation rate for First Nations students living off reserve, and rates of 80% for Métis students and 90% for non-Indigenous students (Anderson & Richards, 2016). This outcome is just one of many that reflects a history of systemic oppression imposed on Indigenous peoples living in Canada that laid an uneven foundation for opportunity and advancement.

Through generations of inequality, Indigenous peoples have demonstrated resiliency in the face of colonial oppression, multi-generational traumas, mass redistribution, and changes in sociopolitical, cultural and physical environments (LaFramboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006). Resilience is a process resulting in a capacity to face challenges and become more capable despite adverse experiences, ultimately contributing to growth in ability to withstand future problems (LaFramboise et al., 2006). This resilience has been demonstrated through Indigenous peoples, including residential school survivors, excelling to hold leadership roles in government, law, education, the arts, and their communities (TRC, 2015). Further, resilience has been demonstrated as Indigenous peoples fight to retain their cultural identities, including language, arts, ceremonies and communities (TRC, 2015). Viewed through this strengths-based lens, resiliency provides the backdrop of which further engagement can be built on.

### **Preserving Indigenous Culture**

Contrary to colonialism's oppressive methods, the Indigenous worldviews supports the concept of "power with," rather than "power over," with a "deep sense of reverence for nature...and enormous responsibility for sustaining harmonious relations within the whole natural world..." (Knudtson & Suzuki, 2006, p. 13). Within Indigenous worldviews, wisdom is seen to develop over a lifetime and is traditionally conveyed through oral histories, stories, dances and ceremonial activities, and passed through informal mentorship from Elders to younger generations (Archibald, 2008; Blackstock et al., 2004; Parent, 2011). Archibald (2008) said, "Only when our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together do we truly have Indigenous education" (p. 12).

Nearly 150 years after Canada founded itself a nation on the land of its Indigenous peoples, it was in May 2016 that Canada officially adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration describes the individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples around the world with emphasis on cooperative relationships with Indigenous peoples (Government of Canada, 2016; United Nations, 2007). The Declaration affirms that Indigenous peoples should have the freedoms of all human rights, including rights to self-determination, and rights to a nationality and Indigenous nation or community without forced assimilation or destruction of their culture (United Nations, 2007). Although the adoption of the Declaration does not change the irreversible injustices that have been imposed on the Indigenous peoples living in Canada, it does support conditions to further develop a mutually respectful relationship based on principles of equality and partnership (Government of Canada, 2016). This adoption has further solidified the movement away from referring to First Nations,

Métis and Inuit peoples living in Canada as Aboriginal and towards the preferred term of Indigenous, a preference also shared by other Indigenous peoples abroad (United Nations, n.d.).

Indigenous peoples living in Canada continue to demonstrate resiliency and strength in remaining connected to their cultures (Archibald, 2008). Indigenous cultures share commonalities based in principles of the interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical self, influenced by family, community, band, and nation (Archibald, 2008). Further, Indigenous peoples are concerned with promoting Indigenous ways for their youth populations, especially for those who do not know or have lost their connections with culture and community. Increasingly, the role of schools in providing these opportunities is being explored. It is critical that the education system, as part of a larger structure that destroyed many Indigenous cultures, responds accordingly and attempts to contribute and enhance the lives of Indigenous students.

**Engaging Indigenous youth through culturally relevant programming.** Spiritually-oriented and communal programs that integrate both Indigenous and Western knowledge while emphasizing Indigenous values, languages and traditions are the premise of culturally relevant programming (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). Maintaining cultural relevance in programming for youth encourages a sense of cultural awareness, identity, and continuity (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). In addition, cultural engagement, positive personal identity, community connectedness, and positive peer and family relationships are identified as key factors promoting resilience in Indigenous youth populations (Toombs, Kowatch & Mushquash, 2016). There have not been many published evaluations of such efforts, although more recently several have emerged.

Hackett and colleagues' (2016) described the "Going Off, Growing Strong" program that acknowledged the youth voice and desire to "go off" to explore the land, and gather food and resources for the community. This culturally relevant program introduced Inuit youth with local harvester-mentors to reconnect to their culture as a means of encouraging resilience in response to a cluster of Inuit male youth suicides in Nunatsiavut, one of four self-governed Inuit regions in Canada. The weekly program engaged youth in traditional Inuit activities, such as hunting, gathering wood and plants, and participating in arts and crafts with program staff harvesters and outreach workers. Two cohorts of male youth participated in the program from 2012 to 2015, of which data were provided from the first cohort ( $n = 10$ ). The program was evaluated through both qualitative and quantitative data provided by youth, and community members and researchers involved in the program. Youth reported improved confidence and improved skills in learning traditional Inuit skills (Hackett et al., 2016). This study provides support in utilizing the youth voice, in this example, their desire to "go off on the land," as a springboard to Indigenous youth engagement in learning traditional cultural practices.

Another community program cited in taking a proactive approach was Project Journey, a program implemented by the Ontario Provincial Police to collaborate with Indigenous communities that experienced a high number of youth suicides (Muisse & Mackey, 2017). Project Journey was based on similar strength-based programming in the United States, called Project Venture, where adolescents were provided opportunities to engage in positive activities that fostered leadership and personal growth within a cultural framework. The Ontario program attempted to strengthen relationships among families, schools, communities, Elders, and police through youth engagement in family activities, community services, arts and culture, and the police athletics league, where police officers coached sports activities for children and

adolescents. This study noted success in engaging adolescents as leaders in their communities, success in school buy-in and classroom accommodations to programming, as well as community-level success observed in adolescent participation in a weekend retreat (Muisse & Mackey, 2017). This study demonstrates the receptiveness and engagement of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members in addressing a community need. Further, this study reveals the successes that can be achieved when these relationships are strengthened.

Further community programming that emphasized a connection to culture is Parent's (2011) article on community-based programming for Indigenous youth in Vancouver, British Columbia, drawn from a study conducted with other researchers that investigated the role of Indigenous knowledge, or holism, that supported youth. Holism is defined as the connection among the person, community, environment, and spirit world. The four community organizations of study featured a range of holistic programming, such as support services, spiritual guidance, advocacy, sports and recreation, and arts and culture activities. Data were collected from an Elder ( $n = 1$ ) and eight youth participants through sharing circles and interviews. Findings showed that when programs focused on the strengths of youth, program participation furthered their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being and supported stronger connections to family and community. The youth believed that the holistic programming received through community organizations provided them with educational opportunities to live harmoniously with others, their community, nature, and the spirit world; however, of formal education, youth reported a negative school experience but held the belief that pursuing higher education would be invaluable to their personal well-being and success. Holistic programs assisted youth in understanding who they are, where they come from, and what their culture can teach them about their present reality. Further, youth participants reported holistic programs supported their sense

of belonging to their community and a space to receive guidance and mentorship to lead healthy lives (Parent, 2011). This study supports identity development for youth involved in programming that supports traditional teachings and cultural beliefs.

Mentoring programs provide adult guidance, support and companionship for children and youth. Data investigating the impacts of community-based mentoring showed benefits for Indigenous mentee participants. DeWit, Wells, Elton-Marshall and George's (2017) investigation compared Indigenous ( $n = 125$ ) and non-Indigenous ( $n = 734$ ) youth between 6 and 17 years old participating as mentees to primarily non-Indigenous adult mentors within Canadian Big Brother Big Sisters programming. The Big Brother Big Sisters mentoring programs utilize a strengths-based approach in providing youth a one-to-one match with an adult role model within Canadian urban centres. The study compared the mentoring experiences, mental health and behavioural outcomes of mentoring program mentees reported through a Big Brothers Big Sisters national survey, as well as parent reports on mental health outcomes. At 18-month follow up, Indigenous mentees and their parents reported a reduction in parent-related emotional problems and social anxiety not found among non-Indigenous mentees. Further, results supported that culturally-matched mentors and mentees may prove even more effective. Indigenous mentees reported higher levels of mentoring relationship quality, spent more time with their adult mentors on a weekly basis, and participated in more mentoring activities than non-Indigenous mentees (DeWit et al., 2017). This study provided evidence that, if interested and given the opportunity, many Indigenous youth in a mentee-role reap the benefits that community mentoring programs seek to provide.

Community-based programming for Indigenous youth can provide learning opportunities for personal growth, as well as foster cultural education and connection. Schools are another

venue to engage Indigenous youth through programming. Since education is compulsory for children and youth living in Canada (Government of Ontario, 2006), the school is a convenient place to engage students through programming addressed to meet an array of needs, including intrapersonal and interpersonal development, as well as opportunities for cultural connection.

### **School-based Programming for Indigenous Youth**

The school, as a place where students spend most of their waking hours, is an environment that contributes to their guidance and influence. Indigenous youth can best identify with the mainstream educational system when they see themselves represented as part of the fabric of the school. Students who lack a sense of belongingness withdraw from the school experience and do not feel accepted by classmates, nor believe that school is influential to their future (Willms, 2003).

Considerable efforts are underway to support Indigenous engagement through education, including Indigenous programming and more Indigenous school staff, to reverse the long history of failures to Indigenous education that has left a gap in school achievement (Lewington, 2013). The inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the planning of culturally relevant programming can foster a sense of citizenship and contribution and benefit Indigenous youth in becoming more connected to themselves, their communities and their cultures (Klinck et al., 2005; Rose & Giles, 2007). Indigenous youth programs must possess a cultural context, be evaluated by Indigenous communities, and be approached through a strengths-based lens, rather than framed by individual problems or deficits (Klinck et al., 2005; Parent, 2011; Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015). Inclusive programming built on Indigenous cultures and values (Rose & Giles, 2007) may include a place for storytelling and stories in education and curricula (Archibald, 2008). Programs that include Elders (Gunn et al., 2011; Rose & Giles, 2007) and

intergenerational relationships (Archibald, 2008) and focus on Indigenous languages, cultures and history are more likely to retain Indigenous students in the school system (Gunn et al., 2011). Crooks, Burleigh, Snowshoe, Lapp, Hughes, and Sisco (2015b) note that culturally relevant programming can complement and enhance academic success, allowing students to embrace their culture *and* be successful students. When a youth feels a sense of belongingness to school they are more invested, see themselves as part of the school's success, and value the relationships and institutions where they experience these connections (Karcher, Holcomb, & Zambrano, 2008).

When Indigenous youth are supported in finding a fluidity in moving between their Indigenous and mainstream identities, they benefit from protective factors such as enhanced adjustment, social competencies, personal mastery, and improved academics (LaFramboise et al., 1993; LaFramboise et al., 2006). This skillset is known as bicultural competence (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Smith-Mohamed, 1998). Further, "... an emphasis on bicultural competence suggests that it is *through* the strengthening of cultural identity in the school setting that students experience enhanced identity and success overall" (Crooks et al., 2015b, p. 11). This connectedness allows Indigenous peoples to reclaim and reaffirm their traditional ways of knowing with emphasis on engagement in family, school and community (Crooks et al., 2010a).

### **School-based Peer Mentor Programming**

Mentoring can promote connectedness by providing students with social bonding and sense of belonging while developing stronger connectedness to self, others and society (Karcher, 2005). Research suggests that school-based mentoring enhances students' connectedness to school (Karcher, 2005; King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002; Portwood, Ayers, Kinnison, Waris, & Wise, 2005), parents (Karcher, 2005), the family (King et al., 2002), and the



community (Portwood et al., 2005). These connections can all serve as protective factors (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, & Hughes, 2010b; Karcher, 2009) offering both social and academic benefits (Karcher, 2009; Portwood & Ayers, 2005). Peer mentoring programs support youth development by providing participants with new experiences and opportunities (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

Although mentoring programs hold promise, not all programs are equally effective. DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper's (2002) meta-analysis of the effects of 55 youth mentoring programs found that participation alone yielded small benefits but program effects were enhanced significantly when best practices were utilized and strong match relationships were formed. Effective practices identified for youth mentoring programs are, (a) length of involvement, (b) contact frequency, (c) mentor screening, (d) mentor training, (e) matching, (f) structured activities, (g) mentoring relationship monitoring, (h) individual supervision, (i) mentor support group, (j) ongoing mentor training, and (k) formal parent involvement (DuBois, et al., 2002, p. 165). DuBois et al.'s (2011) second meta-analysis on effective youth mentoring programs found a common pattern in benefits for mentees on outcome measures, such as improved interpersonal and development processes, compared to declines among un-mentored youth. Similar results in other peer mentoring research have shown that program participation helped prevent the expected declines in connectedness that commonly occurs over a school year (Karcher 2005, 2011). Meaningful relationships with mentors can foster interpersonal and developmental processes that help mentees to avoid risks and reach their full potential (DuBois et al., 2011). These programs continue to be effective using older peers as mentors and in group

contexts. Although most mentoring research has focused on benefits to mentees, there are also benefits to mentors.

**Benefits for youth mentors.** Through modeling identity development (Karcher, 2008), youth mentors may experience positive changes in how they see themselves and internalize their social role (Rhodes, 2002). Riessman (1965) states, “While it may be uncertain that people *receiving* help are always benefited, it seems more likely that the people *giving* help are profiting from their role” (p. 27). Engagement with younger peers offers mentors the opportunity to explore their leadership potential (Karcher, 2008; Walters, 2006). Utilizing a strengths-based approach, mentors and mentees may become more aware of their talents and interests through future-oriented activities that support their identity development (Karcher, 2008). This type of exploration through activity and play provides opportunity for the group to appreciate the values and uniqueness of others. Youth who fulfill a mentoring role to younger students report larger gains in school-related connectedness and self-esteem compared to their peers, suggesting that mentoring programs can promote positive development in both mentors *and* mentees (Karcher, 2009). Coyne-Foresi (2015) found that elementary youth mentors’ school connectedness scores were significantly higher following participation in a peer mentoring program, compared to declines reported on all subscales by a control group. This suggested program involvement may have served as a protective factor and buffered against the normative decline in school connectedness that is typically observed over the course of the school year (Coyne-Foresi, 2015).

Although some research has shown mentoring programs involving youth mentors to be less effective in sustaining long-term effects of the program, as compared to adult mentors (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008), tapping into the leadership potential of youth mentors and exploring an alternative learning approach to social skill development should not be

underestimated (Coyne-Foresi, 2015). These successes cannot always be captured by data collection methods typically used in program investigations. In many ways, only the program participants and facilitators can observe what the mentoring process can accomplish (Nakkula & Harris, 2010). The continued exploration of the “messiness” of evaluating the real lived experiences in programs is encouraged to move the field forward (Crooks, Exner-Cortens, Burm, Lapointe, & Chiodo, 2017).

The following sections describe a culturally relevant school-based programming for Indigenous youth of which, the peer mentoring program, specifically, is the focus of the current study.

#### **The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Programs**

The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programs are a range of culturally-relevant, strengths-based programs that were developed in partnership between the Fourth R and Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB). The TVDSB is home to 160 schools and 74, 000 students, serving three counties and 7000 square kilometers surrounding London, Ontario (TVDSB, 2016). Within its rural catchment, the TVDSB has tuition agreements with three First Nations communities (Oneida Nation of the Thames, Chippewas of the Thames, Munsee-Delaware First Nation) where youth attend school in their communities until grade six or eight, then are bussed into London (TVDSB, 2014). Data from Statistics Canada (2013) National Household Survey reports that London’s urban First Nations and Indigenous population is 2% of the municipal population. In 2014 there were 1539 self-identified Indigenous students, with over three quarters living in the city of London (TVDSB, 2014). Three secondary schools in London have Indigenous student populations that account for 5 to 24% of the student body. These three schools have additional supports for Indigenous students, including First Nations Counsellors

and Native Language and Studies courses<sup>1</sup>, of which are allocated and determined by TVDSB's review of Indigenous student enrollment numbers.

Indigenous youth in Ontario have the lowest rates of academic success and graduation (Lewington, 2013; Stockdale et al., 2013) and these general patterns are evident in TVDSB. For example, the TVDSB reports higher absenteeism among self-identified Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students, with increasing absenteeism as students reach higher grades (TVDSB, 2014). Several recommendations made in 2012 by the TVDSB Indigenous Attendance Working Group shifted focus from "student attendance" to "student engagement." These recommendations included exploring how education can support Indigenous student success, work collaboratively with key stakeholders to develop a holistic Indigenous programming plan, develop cultural competency of staff and students, and monitor and measure programming outcomes (TVDSB, 2014). The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programming supports these goals in its pursuit for Indigenous student engagement and empowerment.

The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program is a derivative of the Fourth R program (Wolfe et al., 2009), a secondary school curriculum aimed to address three risk-behaviours in adolescence: violence, substance abuse, and unsafe sex. The name Fourth R stems from the phrase "reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic," and places importance to the development of healthy "relationships" (Crooks, Wolfe, Hughes, Jaffe, & Chiodo, 2008). The Fourth R utilizes role play scenarios for realistic opportunities to practice skill development and challenge the societal constructs of gender (Crooks et al., 2008), uses a prevention and harm-reduction approach to

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<sup>1</sup> As noted, Indigenous is the preferred term. First Nations and Native is used to as part of the job title and course, respectively, offered though TVDSB. Use of other terms, such as Aboriginal, may be used in this paper to reflect student comments.

substance use, and maximizes youth development of prosocial skills, including the use of assertiveness (Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, Hughes, & Ellis, 2012).

The Fourth R program team began working with TVDSB and surrounding First Nations community partners in 2006 to develop and evaluate culturally-relevant, relationship-focused, school-based programming initiatives for Indigenous youth called The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations (Crooks et al, 2015b). The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program utilizes culturally appropriate teaching strategies (e.g. sharing circles) and emphasizes the inclusion of community members who share their teachings and experiences (Crooks, Burleigh, & Sisco, 2015a). Further, the programs include locally relevant cultural teachings and traditions, and culturally appropriate use of mentoring in encouraging youth identity and connectedness to culture (Crooks et al., 2015a). The program initiatives include a peer mentoring program, of which is the focus of this study. Other programming initiatives include a cultural leadership course (Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, Burns, & Camillo, 2010a), two credit courses (Aboriginal Perspectives Fourth R and Aboriginal Peer Leadership), a small group program (Healthy Relationships Plus), a cultural leadership camp, and an Indigenous Leadership Committee (Crooks et al., 2015b).

Crooks and colleagues (2015a) conducted qualitative case study with 12 adult stakeholders' (Elders, teachers, Indigenous counsellors, school board staff, and community members) involved in Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programming. Investigating the role of culturally relevant programming on student intrapersonal and interpersonal development, their analysis revealed two themes. The first theme identified the importance of identity and belonging, displayed through knowing oneself, possessing confidence, a sense of belonging and engagement, and leadership. The stakeholders reported their belief that the Indigenous programming combats marginalization within the mainstream school setting and provides

increased comfort and sense of belonging. Further, this increased belonging was believed to lend to increased engagement beyond programming, and provided confidence for further success in engagement in other school activities and developing youth roles as leaders. Further, the stakeholders reported that Indigenous students could explore their identities and not need to compromise their identities to learn. The second theme identified the role of programming in building cultural connectedness as a way of enhancing the students' sense of identity, and provided the opportunity for students to perceive themselves as confident and successful leaders. The adult stakeholders identified shame as a negative influence in lives of youth, and acknowledged the possibility that youth do not identify shame as it may be an internalized experience. Cultural connectedness plays a part in the program's aims to combat shame systemically shaped by colonialism and stresses the importance of identity and belonging as sources of resiliency (Crooks et al., 2015a).

Similarly, the thematic outcomes found through student, educator and principal responses in Crooks and colleagues' (2015b) study of a variety of programming revealed participation contributed to student success, improved confidence, leadership skills and a sense of belonging. Participants believed the culturally relevant role models involved were instrumental to program success (Crooks et al., 2015b).

**Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program.** The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program, as part of the larger Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program, runs in select TVDSB schools. The program matches students in grades 10 through 12, who demonstrate a commitment to and have experienced success at school, with grade nine students to assist in smoothing the transition to secondary school (Crooks et al., 2015b). The peer mentoring program is a 16-week culturally focused curriculum that provides one-to-one peer

mentorship among grade nine students and older student peers. The group meets weekly during the lunch hour under the supervision of an Indigenous adult facilitator who engages the participants in cultural activities. There is a workbook to support the mentoring work and it includes some of the cultural teachings shared in the program. Mentors participate in a full-day training in their roles and responsibilities and are supported by a mentor manual. A teacher from the school assists with the coordination of the mentoring program and is available to support students if required.

The goals of the peer mentoring program are to facilitate and foster healthy and positive relationships with self and peers, including help-seeking and self-advocacy skills (Crooks et al., 2017). Further, the program encourages student cultural identity and connectedness (Crooks et al., 2015a) through exposure to culturally relevant activities and discussions. Additional goals, as stated in the mentor manual (Lapp, Cywink, Crooks, Coyne-Foresi, Kirkham, & Hughes, 2016), are to help younger mentees become involved and connected to their schools through positive older peer leadership, and to provide youth mentors with volunteer experience while they discover and develop their mentees' interests at school and in the community. The peer mentoring program fosters school engagement in hopes of further solidifying youth participation in their education and pursuit of long-term educational goals.

Crooks and colleagues (2017) recently conducted a two-year longitudinal investigation of the younger peer mentee (grades 7-9) participants ( $n = 28$ ) in both the elementary and secondary peer mentoring programs. The study revealed that mentees who had two years of mentoring reported significantly better mental health and felt more connected to their cultural identity compared to students who did not receive mentoring. Conversely, mentee participants who received one year of mentoring did not report significant improvements in mental health or

cultural identity. Mentee interview data revealed perceived improvements in identified themes of intrapersonal (i.e. cultural affirmation and improved self-confidence), interpersonal (i.e. improved peer relationships and connection with the adult facilitator), cultural (i.e. meeting with Indigenous peers and participation in cultural teachings) and healthy relationship development (i.e. positive communication skills) (Crooks et al., 2017).

An earlier investigation of the peer mentoring program showed a high retention rate for mentors and mentees, high satisfaction and enjoyment in the program, and revealed that the peer mentoring program did engage students and enhance the school experience (Crooks et al., 2010b). Students, educators and principals in Crooks et al.'s (2015b) study of the peer mentoring program reported specific benefits related to developing healthy relationships skills and communication styles, and increased comfort in school for student participants. The educators and school principals identified the development of positive relationships as a stepping stone to increase school involvement. Youth mentors reported they felt valued in their leadership roles mentoring younger peers, and this contributed to a more positive self-concept and positively influenced their behaviour (Crooks et al., 2015b). However, previous research with mentors did not assess important protective factors (such as cultural connectedness and positive self-perception) in a systematic way. Thus, the current study will more deeply explore the perceived benefits of mentoring from the perspective of high school youth mentors.

### **Research Questions**

Contributing to the strengths-based body of research investigating Indigenous youth programming, this study asked: what are the perceived benefits of peer mentoring for youth mentors? This study investigated the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program's influence on facilitating a positive self-concept, fostering cultural connectedness and exploring



identity for youth mentors. These elements are of particular focus in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations curriculum created for student self-exploration, cultural reflection and personal goal setting. It was hypothesized that through the experience of mentoring younger peers, mentor participants would perceive an increase in intrapersonal (i.e. self-perception, self-confidence, relationship with self) and interpersonal (i.e. relationships with others, self-advocacy skills) development, as well as increased connectedness to school and culture. It was predicted that as a result of participation, mentors will see themselves as role models to their younger mentees.

### **Method**

This study utilized a mixed methods case study research design, incorporating both a concept mapping procedure and thematic analysis. The Research Ethics Board at Western University (Appendix A) approved all protocols, as did the Research and Assessment Department with TVDSB (Appendix B). A TVDSB amendment request to the study's consent form was submitted and approved by Research Ethics Board at Western University (Appendix C).

A mixed methods investigative approach is supported as an effective method addressing the complexities of age, gender and culture that exist in community programming (Andrew & Halcomb, 2006). A mixed methods design captures the complexities of real lived experience and intersects the strengths of both the exploratory nature of qualitative investigation with generalizable quantitative methods (Andrew & Halcomb, 2006). Concept mapping was utilized as a mixed methods tool to highlight the student voice in determining the benefits found through mentoring younger peers. Further, concept mapping's quantitative analysis of qualitative data aligned with Indigenous methods by putting the meaning-making of the collective focus question responses in the hands of the youth mentors to interpret and identify importance. These mixed

methods findings were further explored through additional questions in the semi-structured interviews (Appendix D), where students discussed the role of mentoring on different aspects of their lives (e.g., family, school, community, culture, peers, self).

### **Participants**

Twelve youth mentors consented to participate in the study of a possible 18 Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program participants. Eleven participants, four male and seven female, were interviewed from two secondary schools, one rural ( $n = 6$  students) and one urban ( $n = 5$  students), within TVDSB. The average age of the participants was 17.15 years ( $SD = .69$ ), with ages ranging from 16 to 18 years. All study participants served as mentors in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring programs that commenced in the fall of 2016. Nine mentors had previous experience as mentors in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program; this was the first experience as mentors for two of the participants. All students were Indigenous, except for one. The decision was made to include this non-Indigenous participant because the focus was on mentors in the program. Furthermore, cultural identity does not align perfectly with ethnic identity; thus, a student who is not Indigenous may identify strongly with an Indigenous community and teachings.

**Ethical considerations.** Research involving Indigenous populations has often been conducted by non-Indigenous researchers producing results that have not been returned to participants nor have benefitted them or their communities (Canadian Institutes for Health Research, 2014; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014). To protect the interests and rights of Indigenous populations, a framework to guide the ethical principles has been developed based on the core values of reciprocity and respect (Canadian Institutes for Health Research, 2014). The principles outlined by the First Nations Information Governance

Centre (2014) hold that Indigenous populations that participate in research must have Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession of the information.

The concept mapping procedure of this study attempted to honour the Indigenous student voice by retrieving the unique statements made by mentors in response to a question asking of the general benefits of mentoring. The unique statements were kept as verbatim as possible and returned to the mentors for this sorting and rating of importance. During the interview process, the Indigenous youth mentors were encouraged to speak openly about their experiences mentoring their younger peers. They were also provided with an opportunity to member check their transcripts. Specific questions (Appendix D) prompted student reflection in numerous areas of their lives (e.g., family, school, community, culture, peers, self). Further, when analyzing the data, the codebook (Appendix E) used was originated from a codebook utilized in a similar project (see Crooks et al., 2017) and revised to reflect the outcomes of this particular study and the mentors' responses. Through these steps outlined I endeavored to preserve the student voice to achieve a collaborative research endeavor. The program evaluation put the research back into the hands of the participants to truly capture the student voice.

I sought to acknowledge and respect the cultural protocols designated for working with Indigenous populations. Provisions followed when conducting research with Indigenous populations (see Canadian Institutes for Health Research, 2014) that were specific to this study included the respect for community customs and codes of practice and mutual benefits in research. When attending mentoring sessions at each secondary school where research was conducted, I demonstrated respect for community customs and codes of practice by taking cues, such as waiting to be introduced and participating in a smudge, from the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program adult facilitator and youth participants. Further, I undertook the

research with a commitment to offer mutual benefits in both providing me with research experience and informing the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program's design and delivery as identified through voice of the mentor participants in the study.

Upon study completion, each mentor participant was provided a summary of the collective findings (Appendix G) to honour their contribution and ownership of the information they provided. The combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods used in investigating the perceived benefits of mentoring younger peers can provide a platform to highlight Indigenous ways of knowing in culturally relevant programming within the education system. Data from this study were also included with the annual feedback report to the board, which is an important venue for identifying benefits of programming and can influence future funding decisions. That is, providing mentors with the opportunity to share the benefits they have experienced with the board could directly influence the board's decision to continue funding the program.

## **Measures**

**Demographic data.** The demographic data collected from the youth mentors included school, age, and gender. I did not collect information on student Indigenous status.

**Interview.** Interview data informed two processes: concept mapping and thematic analysis. The interview included nine questions (one concept mapping question, and eight additional questions expanding on the participant experiences) (see Appendix D).

**Concept mapping.** The interviews utilized six-step concept mapping (preparing for concept mapping, generating the ideas, structuring the statements, concept mapping analysis, interpreting the maps, utilization) with use of multidimensional scaling and subsequent cluster analysis (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Open-ended responses to the focus question, "Thinking about

the many people and places in your life, as well as your own journey of personal growth, in what ways has your role as a peer mentor benefitted your life?” were the basis of the concept mapping procedure. My review of the 11 interviewee responses to the concept mapping questions provided 56 unique statements. The statements were identified with supervisor collaboration. I prepared packages for each interview participant that contained 56 strips of cardstock listing the unique statements from the interview and a sheet of paper with all the statements to be rated. Instructions for the activity accompanied the package contents and explained that mentor participants were to first sort the 56 strips of cardstock in any way that made sense to them. Further instructions detailed that participants were not to sort all the statements into one pile nor put them in 56 different piles. Participants were provided coloured sticky notes and paper clips to label and fasten the piles. The second task required participants to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert-type rating scale (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = very important, 5 = extremely important) in response to the focus question. When complete, the unique statements sorted into labeled piles and rating scale sheets of paper were returned to me in the envelopes labelled only with each participant’s identifier number, to maintain confidentiality.

*Thematic analysis.* Additional interview questions followed an interview guide (Appendix D) and asked the youth mentor participant of his/her experiences in the program, as well as the program’s influence on the mentor’s life, schooling, culture, and self. Data from these follow-up questions were analyzed to augment the concept mapping though thematic analysis. Member checking was implemented where participants were provided a copy of the transcribed interview to review and/or adjust their responses.

**Procedure**

In April 2017, I attended a Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program session at each of the two schools. There, I explained the current study and research objectives and procedures. Peer mentors who were interested in participating in the study received a letter of information and consent form that required a parent or legal guardian's signature (if the student was under 18) or a consent form for them to sign (if they were 18 or older). I collected the consent forms directly from participants who were 18 years old. I collected the additional forms requiring parental consent from each school's lead teacher, who was the school staff member overseeing the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programs. On two occasions, I telephoned parents of two willing participants under the age of 18 and obtained verbal consent for their child to participate. I provided each schools' lead teacher a schedule of available dates and times for mentor interviews to be conducted.

**Interviews.** In early May 2017, I completed the mentor interviews during the school lunch hour in a quiet space within each school site. Interviews averaged 8 minutes long, and ranged from 3 minutes to 15 minutes in length. I conducted between one and six interviews per day at lunchtime in an attempt to minimize disruption to the academic day. Following each interview, each participant received a \$10 gift certificate for their time. In all, 11 interviews were conducted. Despite frequent contact with the lead teacher and four unsuccessful visits to the school, the twelfth mentor could not be located at school and was not included in the study. The adult facilitator reported that the twelfth mentor had poor attendance in the mentoring group.

**Sorting and rating activity.** In late May 2017, I coordinated and scheduled with each school's lead teacher dates to meet as many interview participants as possible for the sorting and rating activity, where students arranged the unique statements obtained through the interview

process. This step was essential so that students could provide their own interpretation and meaning to the data. Nine youth mentors ( $n = 6$  from rural secondary school and  $n = 3$  from urban school) participated in the initial the sorting and rating activities that were held at each school. The participants worked independently with up to six people in a room at a time to complete the sorting and rating tasks. The process took 45 minutes over the lunch hour to complete at each school. One additional youth mentor from the urban school who was absent the day her peers participated in the sorting and rating activity completed the tasks later that week and took 20 minutes to complete the activities. In all, 10 youth mentors participated in the concept mapping sorting and rating activity. As compensation for mentors' time sorting the statements, each student received a \$20 gift certificate.

### **Data Analyses**

The audio-recorded interviews were processed to text via Trint (2017), a cloud-based transcription program, before employing the concept mapping analysis. Concept mapping employs "...the open contribution of participant stakeholders' ideas on a specific issue, organizes the ideas, and portrays them in pictures or maps that are readily understood" (Kane & Trochim, 2007, p. 2). Concept mapping is undertaken on the basis of one general question. The question should be as broad as possible without leading participants in a particular direction (Kane & Trochim, 2007). The concept mapping data analysis was conducted in response to the focus question, "Thinking about the many people and places in your life, as well as your own journey of personal growth, in what ways has your role as a peer mentor benefitted your life?"

Interview transcripts were entered in a Microsoft Excel (2016) program where each unique statement was separated and arranged in its own cell. The unique statements were extracted verbatim, or as close to verbatim as possible, from the interviews. For example, the

verbatim statement, “So, I'm Métis, I'm like, I don't like look, I don't really have to look Native to be Native, obvious,” was edited to reflect a more cohesive statement, “I don't really have to look Native to be Native.” I endeavored to preserve the statements as close to their original states as possible; however, some statements were minimally edited for clarity and conciseness (Kane & Trochim, 2007).

Following the participant sorting and rating activity, the student structured and sorted statements were entered and processed in Concept Systems Incorporated (2017) software, a cloud-based tool for group concept mapping analysis. I used the software to conduct multidimensional scaling and hierarchal cluster analysis. The multidimensional scaling data point map placed the sorted statements along X-Y coordinates to demonstrate each statement's location and spatial relationship with the others. The hierarchal cluster analysis partitions the statements on the map into clusters and reflects a conceptual grouping of the original statements. Average importance ratings are calculated separately after the cluster solution has been chosen (Kane & Trochim, 2007).

Beyond the concept mapping analysis, answers to additional questions were coded and themed using Dedoose V7.6.6 (2017), a cloud-based program used for coding and analysis of qualitative data. I used a revised provisional coding template (adapted from Crooks et al., 2017), continually adding new codes or removing inapplicable codes. From the root codes utilized, parent and child codes were developed to provide further specificity of data provided by student mentors. This open-coding process is noted by coding themes as they emerge rather than imposing preconceived categories (Patton, 2002). With the use of the refined codebook (Appendix E), I reviewed and coded the 11 interview transcripts. A codebook audit trail (Appendix F) was created to document all changes or modifications made to the codebook.



Memos of my thoughts, procedures and changes were documented through the coding process. To ensure trustworthiness of the data, I established reliability in coding by recoding 35% ( $n = 4$ ) of all interviews with over 90% accuracy.

All data from the transcribed interviews provided by the youth mentor participants were coded, but only data relevant to the research question, “What are the perceived benefits of peer mentoring for youth mentors?” were analyzed. The four overarching themes identified were: (1) Contributions, (2) Relationships, (3) Culture, and (4) Aspirations. I compared and contrasted themes by previous mentoring experience. A summary report of findings (Appendix G) was provided to each student participant via each school’s lead teacher as well as a copy to the school board.

## Results

### Concept Mapping

**Multidimensional scaling: Data point map.** The youth mentor participant statement sorting and rating data were entered into the Concept Systems Incorporated (2017) program. Data were sorted into a binary data matrix, where there were as many rows and columns as statements (i.e., 56 statements in this case). Added together, the matrices created a group proximity matrix that was used in multidimensional scaling displayed in a two-dimensional point map, where each statement had a separate X-Y coordinate point on the map (Kane & Trochim, 2007). The point map (see Figure 1) shows each statement as a single point and provides a visual representation of each statement’s spatial relationship relative to the others. Statements grouped together by the participants more frequently appear closer together (Kane & Trochim, 2007). For example, Statement 22, “It’s really special to know someone feels that comfortable and safe to talk to me about their life,” Statement 32, “Being a mentor you’re kind of leading a few younger

people, and Statement 40, “I like helping kids for their future,” were plotted in close proximity to each other and signify that they were frequently grouped together by participants in the sorting activity. Statements grouped together less frequently by participants were located farther apart (Kane & Trochim, 2007). For example, Statement 4, “I'm there to talk to someone if they need it,” and Statement 39, “I don't really have to look Native to be Native,” were not sorted together by participants and are plotted at opposite sides of the data map.

Nowicki and Brown (2015) explain that a stress value is produced to show how well the data point map fits the group proximity matrix. The stress value ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represents less stress and a better fit, and 1 represents a poor fit (Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Nowicki & Brown, 2015). Stress values that range between 0.205 and 0.365 indicate an acceptable goodness of fit (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Nowicki and Brown (2015) add, “Stress values of 0.39 and lower have less than 1% probability of reflecting a random configuration” (p.10). In this study, the stress value was 0.3578, which falls in the acceptable range. Stress values tend to be lower, reflecting a better statistical fit, when there are more statements and more participants sorting (Kane & Trochim, 2007). In other words, the stress value speaks to the entire data point map as it fits the group proximity matrix, different from the bridging values assigned to each statement as explained below.

**Hierarchical cluster analysis: Cluster map.** To ensure the statements are clustered with conceptually related statements, a hierarchal cluster analysis is conducted, described by Nowicki and Brown (2015) as “...an iterative process which begins by putting each statement into its own cluster and continues at each step to combine two clusters until all of the statements are put into one cluster. The points on the map don't change but the boundary line around the clusters differ between iterations” (p. 10). I, along with two other researchers, interpreted the data presented in

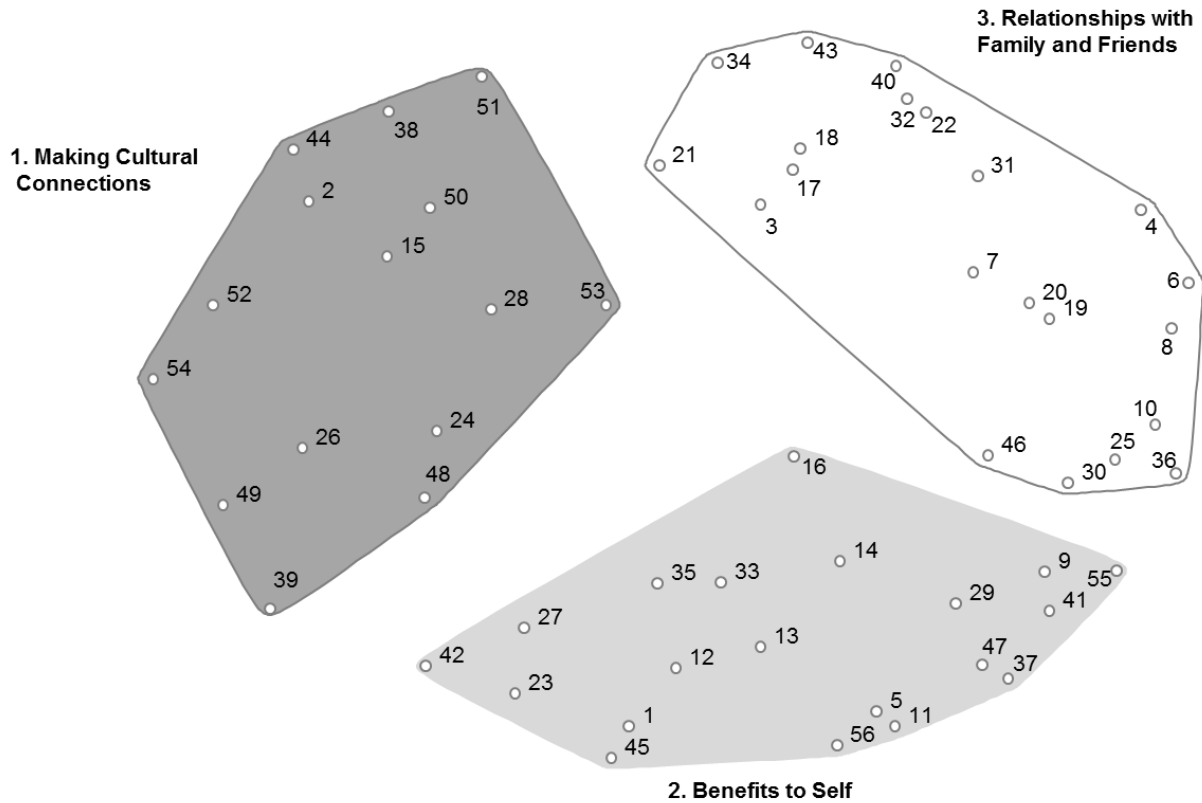
the maps and selected the best solution reflective of the focal question used in the concept mapping process.

A bridging value is calculated for each statement and cluster and reflects how frequent a statement was sorted with other statements in the vicinity on the map (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Bridging indices range from 0 to 1, where values near 0 indicate that the statements were frequently sorted in the same vicinity with a high degree of consistency, and values near 1 were frequently not sorted in the same vicinity with a high degree of consistency (Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Nowicki & Brown, 2015). Statements with low bridging values (near 0) are considered “anchor” statements as they represent statements more frequently sorted to a vicinity on a map (Kane & Trochim, 2007). For example, Statement 16, “It's something that I value and it's an important part of my life,” had a bridging value of 0.00 and acts as an anchor statement and is interpreted to be the best indicator of content in that area of the map (Kane & Trochim, 2007). Conversely, “bridging” statements have higher values (near 1) “bridge” or link two or more distant areas on a map (Kane & Trochim, 2007). For example, Statement 54, “I like to believe a lot of Aboriginal people, in their journey, may think they know everything but everybody is still learning,” had a bridging value of 1.00, and was not rated consistently in the same vicinity by participants; instead, this statement “bridges” different concepts in the map or may have been a difficult statement to sort.

I, along with two other researchers, independently reviewed a range of models between two and 10 clusters and came to the consensus that the three-cluster model was the best conceptual fit to the data; further, the model’s acceptable bridging values indicate good statistical fit (see Figure 1). Clusters ranged in size from 15 to 21 statements with average bridging values

between 0.18 to 0.61. Table 1 lists the statements grouped in each cluster and statement bridging indices.

*Cluster labelling.* Cluster labels were determined through examination of three sources of information: (a) contents of the clusters, (b) labels produced by the participants, and (c) the researchers' independent interpretations of the map (Kane & Trochim, 2007). The small sample size produced a diverse array of participant-created labels for each concept. I sought to honour the student voice and achieve a balance among the themes captured by the participants and the statement contents within each cluster. The following key concepts were identified through the three-cluster map to illustrate the ways youth mentors perceived their mentoring role to benefit their life: (a) Making Cultural Connections ( $M$  bridging index = 0.61), (b) Benefits to Self ( $M$  bridging index = 0.18), and (c) Relationships with Family and Friends ( $M$  bridging index = 0.25).



**Figure 1.** Concept map for the 3-cluster solution showing spatial relationship between 56 generated statements.

*Note.* Statements are labeled by number (see Table 1 for a list of the statements and their reference numbers). Distance between statements indicates degree of similarity; similar statements are closer together.

**Importance ratings.** As part of the concept mapping procedure, participants were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert type scale (1=low importance and 5=high importance) reflective of each statement’s perceived importance as it related to the concept mapping focal question, “Thinking about the many people and places in your life, as well as your own journey of personal growth, in what ways has your role as a peer mentor benefitted your life?” A mean importance rating was calculated for each statement, and cluster mean ratings were created by averaging the statements contained in each cluster. Table 1 shows statement and identification numbers sorted by averaged importance ratings, as well as the averaged cluster ratings with each label. The three statements with the highest mean rating (4.40) were found in each of the three

clusters and include Statement 38, “I know a lot more of my culture,” in the Making Aboriginal Connections cluster, Statement 11, “It’s helped me to be a good person, at home, within my community, and at school,” in the Benefits to Self cluster, and Statement 34, “I’m teaching them but they’re also teaching me,” in the Relationships with Family and Friends cluster.

In the concept map, clusters are shaded dark to light per importance, where darker shading denotes higher mean importance rating (see Figure 1). The light shaded cluster, Relationships with Family and Friends, contains mean statement ratings from 3.60 to 3.69; the medium shaded cluster, Benefits to Self, contain mean statement ratings from 3.70 to 3.79; the darkest shaded cluster, Making Aboriginal Connections, contain mean statement ratings from 3.80 to 3.89. The importance ratings for clusters ranged between 3.65 and 3.84, indicating that all clusters were believed to be important. Further, 19 of the 56 (33%) statements were rated as highly important and given a rating of 4.00 or higher by participants. Importance ratings for statements ranged from 2.70 to 4.40 (see Table 1). The findings are presented below and arranged in order of importance, from highest to lowest average importance rating.

***Cluster 1: Making cultural connections.*** Participants rated this cluster as most important overall ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ), with statement ratings ranging from 2.90 to 4.40. Making Cultural Connections contains the fewest number of statements of all the clusters at 15 statements, and sorted with the least degree of consistency ( $M$  bridging index = 0.61).

***Cluster 2: Benefits to self.*** This cluster contains 20 statements with ratings ranging from 2.70 to 4.40. Containing a high importance rating ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ), the youth mentor participants sorted the statements in this cluster with the highest level of consistency in the map ( $M$  bridging index = 0.18).

**Cluster 3: Relationships with family and friends.** This cluster ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ) contains 21 statements ranging in importance from 3.10 to 4.40. The participants sorted the statements in this cluster with relatively high consistency ( $M$  bridging index = 0.25).

**Cluster map summary.** The three-cluster model demonstrates the best conceptual fit as the individual clusters present as distinct from each other. The clusters Benefits to Self and Relationships with Family and Friends are observed to be positioned closer to each other (see Figure 1), with more distinct groupings of statements, meaning that statements were sorted more frequently together with the same piles by participants. Conversely, the statements in the cluster Making Cultural Connections was more sparsely positioned, however received the highest importance ratings, with nine of 15 statements rated by participants as 4.00 or higher. The cluster map reveals that participants sorted the statements within the Making Cultural Connections with the least consistency ( $M$  bridging index = 0.61) but identified the statements within the cluster most frequently with highest importance. Of all statement importance ratings, mentor participants identified 33% ( $n = 19$ ) of the 56 statements were averaged 4.00 or higher (see Table 1) by mentor participants.

Table 1. Statements for Each Cluster, Importance Ratings, and Statement Bridging Indices

Cluster	Importance Rating ( <i>M</i> )	Bridging Value
<i>1. Making Cultural Connections</i>	3.85	0.61
38 I know a lot more of my culture.	4.40	0.51
54 I like to believe a lot of Aboriginal people, in their journey, may think they know everything but everybody is still learning.	4.30	1.00
52 I can be a mentor for them [my family] if they want to reach out and get in touch with their Aboriginal roots.	4.10	0.75
24 I like being able to stay in contact with the Indigenous people at my school.	4.10	0.46
39 I don't really have to look Native to be Native.	4.00	0.85
49 _____ (adult program facilitator) has a lot of opportunities for us.	4.00	0.75
26 You appreciate high school more and all of its opportunities, especially the FNMI program.	4.00	0.63
51 A lot of my family are not connected with that Aboriginal side, so it gives me the chance to explain things to them and to give them some of the knowledge that I've learned.	4.00	0.59
28 I've become more understanding and open minded to everyone else's different opinions and perspectives.	4.00	0.35
48 It's given me a good connection with _____ (adult program facilitator).	3.90	0.52
50 It gives us a chance to reach out and help people that understand what we're going through.	3.80	0.40
53 I really want to help people learn in my community.	3.70	0.23
15 I have learned about the younger generations in my community and within my school.	3.60	0.44
44 I've had a lot of mentoring experience before this.	3.00	0.79
2 It really gave me hope to be a mentor.	2.90	0.92
<i>2. Benefits to Self</i>	3.79	0.18
11 It's helped me to be a good person, at home, within my community, and at school.	4.40	0.16
13 Becoming a mentor helps me to make good life choices and wiser choices.	4.30	0.07
56 I like feeling good about myself.	4.20	0.19
14 I have re-learned about myself and about my culture.	4.20	0.03
37 It gives me a sense of belonging.	4.10	0.24
12 I make better choices because it reflects on the type of mentor I am.	4.10	0.14
29 It's really helped me want to help other people.	4.00	0.09



Table 1. (continued)

Cluster	Importance Rating ( <i>M</i> )	Bridging Value
35 It's like a morale booster.	3.90	0.13
23 It's made me more of a leader in my community and in my school.	3.90	0.33
16 It's something that I value and it's an important part of my life.	3.90	0.00
33 I think it helps my skills to help lead in other situations.	3.80	0.06
5 It's helped my confidence.	3.80	0.01
55 It has made me feel more open to talking about my problems to my parents and to my counselors.	3.70	0.27
27 It's helped construct my role in my community.	3.70	0.34
9 It's helped me become more sociable.	3.70	0.10
47 I've gained a lot of friends from it.	3.50	0.13
45 This helped me develop the most.	3.50	0.30
42 I think this is probably one of the reasons I got back into _____ (extracurricular activity).	3.20	0.61
1 Being a Fourth R mentor has helped me with school a lot.	3.10	0.32
41 Before this I was a little more shy and I didn't really like talking to people.	2.70	0.17
<i>3. Relationships with Family and Friends</i>	3.64	0.25
34 I'm teaching them but they're also teaching me.	4.40	0.44
4 I'm there to talk to someone if they need it.	4.20	0.38
18 I like sharing my knowledge and teaching the younger generations what I know about my culture.	4.00	0.25
3 There's someone that really depends on you.	3.90	0.19
22 It's really special to know someone feels that comfortable and safe to talk to me about their life.	3.90	0.31
25 I show how high we really can reach.	3.90	0.20
19 I like being an older role model for somebody.	3.80	0.12
40 I like helping kids for their future.	3.80	0.35
10 I've been able to talk to people.	3.70	0.22
36 Helping people makes me feel good about myself.	3.70	0.30
46 I've been able to make greater connections in my school with the students that I work with.	3.70	0.01
31 I've always found myself to be more of a leader.	3.60	0.41
8 It's helped me at home because if anyone ever needed something or somebody to talk to, I could be there.	3.50	0.36
17 I like getting to know other peoples' stories, and I like sharing my stories too.	3.40	0.19
32 Being a mentor you're kind of leading a few younger people.	3.40	0.28
43 I could teach them what they need to know so they can choose what they want later.	3.40	0.33

Table 1. (continued)

Cluster	Importance Rating ( <i>M</i> )	Bridging Value
20 I have younger siblings and I know that they look up to me too.	3.33	0.12
30 I do a lot of volunteer work with younger kids now because of it.	3.22	0.09
6 I've been able to meet new people at my school.	3.20	0.36
7 I got to meet other people from other schools.	3.20	0.06
21 They're [mentees] kind of like my family, in a way.	3.10	0.28

### Thematic Analysis

Four codes emerged as themes that directly applied to the research question, “what are the perceived benefits of peer mentoring for youth mentors?” The four themes were: (1) Contributions, (2) Relationships, (3) Culture, and (4) Aspirations. By review of the coding assignments made to the 11 interviews, themes derived from root, parent and child codes were arranged and ordered by frequency of coding, with the most frequently occurring theme listed first. These themes are discussed below and use of interview quotes to highlight the student voice as participants discussed their experience mentoring younger peers. Table 2 shows sample quotes for all root, parent, and child codes.

Table 2. Root and Child Codes with Sample Quotes

Root Code	Parent Code	Child Code	Sample Quotes
Contributions	Personal Contributions	Self-Appreciation	<i>“It’s helped with my self-esteem a lot and my self-confidence.”</i>
		Self-Efficacy	<i>“...being able to identify when something is wrong as well as being able to appropriately handle it and know who to go to.”</i>
		Knowledge/Skill Acquisition	<i>“...being a mentor does help me...further develop these skills.”</i>
		No Contributions	<i>“...my views of myself have not changed.”</i>
	School Contributions	Role Models	<i>“...the way I carry myself in school situations...has helped me lead better.”</i>
		Academics	<i>“...education-wise, like getting my work done...that helped me to have that goal...help strive to do better in school”</i>
		Participation in School Opportunities	<i>“...it helps me know how to talk to the students that I’m working with right now in my co-op placement...”</i>
		Cognitive	<i>“...it does help me focus more.”</i>

Table 2. (continued)

Root Code	Parent Code	Child Code	Sample Quotes
Contributions (continued)	School Contributions (continued)	Attendance	<i>"...I don't want to end up missing school to miss it (program)."</i>
	Community Contributions		<i>"It's helped me construct my role in my community..."</i>
	Family Contributions		<i>"It's also helped me for home...if anyone ever needed something (or) somebody (to) talk to...(I) could be there."</i>
Relationships	Peer Relationships		<i>"I'm most proud that all the students in the room are friends with me."</i>
	Family Relationships		<i>"... it has made me feel more open to talking about my problems to my parents..."</i>
	Relationships with Fourth R Staff		<i>"It's given me a good connection with _____ (Fourth R staff)."</i>
	Relationships with Other Trusted Adults		<i>"...it has made me feel more open to talking about my problems to...my counsellors..."</i>

Table 2. (continued)

Root Code	Parent Code	Child Code	Sample Quotes
Culture	Cultural Practices/ Teachings		<i>"...it's always nice to be able to smudge..."</i>
	Cultural Identity		<i>"...I've really been able to look at myself and say... you are allowed to call yourself Métis or allowed to call yourself Aboriginal because you feel it, because you know what you are."</i>
	Cultural Togetherness		<i>"...being able to stay in contact with the Indigenous people at my school."</i>
Aspirations	Personal Aspirations		<i>"I want to bring it (culture) back... that's why I'm also learning how to speak Ojibway."</i>
	Professional Aspirations		<i>"...I'm going into... a hard career field."</i>
	Academic Aspirations		<i>"I'm hoping to go to _____ (university) for _____ (program)."</i>

**Contributions.** This theme occurred most frequently throughout coding and was coded in 95 excerpts throughout the interview transcripts. This theme was used to indicate the perceived contribution of the peer mentoring program to the lives of youth mentors. Many of the responses indicated significant, and even transformative benefits experienced by youth. This theme was further coded into four sub-themes:

*Personal contributions.* This was the most frequently coded sub-theme in the study at 56 excerpt applications. All of the mentors ( $n = 11$ ) spoke in some way about the personal contributions their participation as a youth mentor has brought to their lives. This sub-theme was coded if participants discussed contributions of a personal nature and was further coded into four categories.

*Self-appreciation.* This sub-theme was discussed by most mentors ( $n = 10$ ) and coded in 35 excerpts where students discussed views of self, including self-trust and self-confidence. Two mentors spoke of their improved perception of self:

I used to see myself as going nowhere. And, like, I just didn't think of myself good at all. I was in a really bad place and this (the program) is actually one of the things that helped me gain back my confidence getting back what I needed to get back to be successful. (Female Participant #11)

I don't see myself as garbage anymore. I see myself as a fun-loving guy who looks kind of scary but at the same time if you talk to me it's like "Hey, I'm friendly. Talk to me. I need friends." (Male Participant #7)

One mentor spoke of his new-found confidence: "...it's helped me at school again with the confidence. I've been able to be more confident with myself, and because that's such a big role and...I never had anything like that" (Male Participant #1). Excerpts reflected in the self-

appreciation sub-theme spoke of improved self-esteem, self-confidence and self-perception that many mentors ( $n = 5$ ) identified as a new experience since participating in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program. When asked how she perceived herself since beginning the program, one mentor commented, “I see myself as a strong, confident person and hopefully I can help build other people’s confidence, especially in the mentees...” (Female Participant #2). One mentor prided herself on being “*real*” for her mentee and demonstrating that it is okay to have problems. She furthered, “I’m not perfect. I guess that’s how a mentor should be...they’re real, they’re not perfect...I may not be perfect but I’m perfectly me” (Female Participant #6).

Three mentors noted their self-confidence in helping their younger peers:

I take great pride in helping people out because it makes me feel good about myself...

I know that I'm helping them all (mentees) at the same time too. Because I'm leading them in the right direction. (Male Participant #7)

Two male mentors commented on the joy they experience in watching their mentees succeed. One mentor communicated how “rewarding” he found helping others (Male Participant #7). Another commented:

I think the biggest benefit, honestly, is seeing people I help and mentor succeed. For any mentor, that's the proudest moment, when they (mentees) get what they're trying to get to. That's probably the biggest payout ever...I think that, in a way, allows me to succeed as well. (Male Participant #9)

*Self-efficacy*. This sub-theme was coded when students discussed their belief in their ability to affect change or make improvements in their lives or the lives of others. This sub-theme was coded 11 times. Many ( $n = 5$ ) participants referenced their improved clarity in making future decisions and a sense of confidence in these choices. One female mentor commented, “...it (the

program) has helped me with being able to identify when something is wrong as well as being able to appropriately handle it and know who to go to” (Participant #10). One mentor reflected more generally on her ability to create change in her life:

I think my role as being a peer mentor benefited my life, helping me to be a good person, at home, within my community and at school and make better choices because it reflects on the type of mentor I am. So, becoming a mentor just helps to make me good life choices and wiser choices. (Female Participant #2)

Some participants ( $n = 3$ ) noted their confidence in trusting themselves and feel this trait is respected by others, both young and old, who seek their insights. One participant commented, “...people take me more seriously...I like to voice my thinking often and they listen to me more” (Female Participant #6). Four mentors commented on their beliefs in their capacities and abilities to serve as leaders and role models for their mentees. One male referenced his struggle in managing his anger and commented on his awareness of a “moral standard” he demonstrated for the mentees, “...it just really helps out on my own mindset. Being a mentor, I want to set an example...and don't want to make a bad example...” (Participant #7).

*Knowledge/skill acquisition.* The sub-theme was coded nine times when mentors ( $n = 6$ ) discussed ways mentoring improved their knowledge or skills:

I definitely like to think that before the program, I didn't have a whole lot of knowledge on anything whether it be like healthy relationships in general or anything to do with my culture ... The fact that I know that I'm able to learn more and that there is a lot more of that I learn. As well as I know that I will be able to help others now with the information that I have. (Female Participant #10)



My role as a peer mentor has benefited my life by being able to...re-learn about myself and about my culture but also learn about the younger generations in my community and within my school, and then also with the schools around me too... it's something that I value and it's an important part of my life. (Female Participant #3)

*No contributions.* This sub-theme reflected discussion of no influence of personal contribution. One male participant believed his views of himself had not changed throughout the program.

*School contributions.* This sub-theme was discussed by all 11 participants and coded in 32 interview excerpts. School contributions were coded when mentors discussed their participation in the program as impacting their involvement in school activities or their studies. School contributions were further coded into five categories.

*Role models.* This sub-theme was coded 11 times and discussed by seven mentors who spoke of their awareness of self as a role models and leaders, including how they conduct themselves at school. One female mentor commented, "In more of a personal way at school, I guess the way I see myself and the way I carry myself within school situations has helped me...lead better" (Participant #6). One mentor noted that her participation encouraged her to set goals, get her work done, and strive to do better in school with the awareness that she is influencing her younger mentee:

My role as a youth mentor has helped me in school by really realizing...that it's really important to do all of my schoolwork and be successful. And then, to show others how to be successful and that they can be successful. So, it's important to me

that, not only for myself to do the best that I can in school but, to show others that you know to be all that they can be as well. (Female Participant #3)

Some participants ( $n = 5$ ) noted that being a role model helped their mentees learn better at school and cope with school challenges, such as academic effort and peer issues. One mentor commented, “I’m proud that I’m able to lead them (mentees) in different directions and I get to show them that everything’s fine” (Female Participant #6). Another mentor said, “I enjoyed working with the youngest kids because...I could just teach them what they need to know so they can choose what they want later.” (Male Participant #9).

*Academics.* Students ( $n = 5$ ) commented on how participating in the program influenced their academics. The academic sub-theme was coded in 11 excerpts reflective of positive influence or no influence at all. Five mentors identified participation as directly benefitting their academic performance. Some mentors ( $n = 4$ ) spoke of how their participation in the program helped them at school by encouraging their ownership of their studies. One mentor commented, “...education-wise, like getting my work done...that helped me to have that goal...help strive to do better in school” (Female Participant # 2). When asked directly about how the program influenced their academics, five mentors reported the program had no influence on their academics.

*Participation in school opportunities.* This sub-theme was coded four times by two students who discussed how the mentoring program influenced their participation in other school programming. Two mentors spoke of the opportunities at school they have experienced since mentoring.

It's benefited my life and the fact that I've been able to get greater connections in my school with the students that I work with whether they are mentors themselves

or it's the mentees... I've been getting more involved in the Student Leadership Council with making sure that we have a voice in the Thames Valley District School Board...I've been given opportunities to help out with that (Female Participant #10)

*Cognitive.* Discussions of changes in cognition, attention, and focus were captured in four excerpts. Two male participants spoke of their attention-related diagnoses and how program participation has assisted their focus at school.

...with academics, I can't work sitting down. I have to move around, but this (the program) helped me kind of learn to focus...with that, I focus on what my mentee has to do as well as what I have to do. (Male Participant #9)

*Attendance.* This sub-theme was coded twice when two participants noted that the program helped their attendance at school. One mentor reported, "it (the program) definitely helped out because I don't want to end up missing school to miss it (the program)" (Male Participant #7). When asked if the mentoring program had affected her academics, a female mentor responded: "Yes, because I have to be in class...I have to be doing what I'm supposed to be doing to be able to go to the program" (Participant #11).

*Community contributions.* This sub-theme was coded when students attributed the mentoring program as influencing their participation in community events or activities, or involvement in community culture. These themes were coded in five excerpts by five participants. Four participants spoke of their emergent leadership roles in their communities and cited increased involvement in community activities, such as cultural ceremonies. A female participant spoke of the program's broader influence in her life:

... it's helped construct my role in my community because I've become more understanding and open minded to everyone else's different opinions and perspectives. And it's really helped me want to help other people ...I do a lot of volunteer work with younger kids now because of it. (Female Participant #5)

***Family contributions.*** This sub-theme was mentioned by three participants, applied to three excerpts, and was considered participant contributions to family events or activities. One participant noted her awareness that she is a role model to her younger family members. Another participant spoke more generally of her role with her family:

(The program) gives me the opportunity to show my family that it's a good thing that I'm reaching out. Because I am Métis, a lot of my family...don't get connected with that Aboriginal side. So, it gives me the chance to explain things to them and to give them some of the knowledge that I've learned in the mentorship groups. As well, I can be a mentor for them if they want to reach out and get in touch with their Aboriginal roots. (Female Participant #10)

***Relationships.*** This theme was coded in 43 excerpts and identified by all mentor participants ( $n = 11$ ). This theme was used to indicate the variety of current relationships the participants discussed. The Relationships theme contained five sub-themes:

***Peer relationships.*** This sub-theme was used when participants discussed current relationships with peers as providing support. The peer relationships sub-theme was applied to 34 excerpts and mentioned by all 11 participants. Most participants ( $n = 10$ ) reported their personal happiness in improved friendships and contact with peers. Two mentors discussed their improved perspective-taking as a result of working with younger

peers. One participant commented more generally of the relationships made with peers throughout the program:

I'm just happy that the mentoring program exists because I feel like it benefits a lot of people. And it's really fun...it's a good environment. Everybody comes here with a smile on their face and even if they don't and they're having a bad time...we smudge to get all of those...negative energies out of the way. And then after that we're all laughing and...picking on each other like family because that's what we are, all family at the end of the day. (Female Participant #3)

Some mentors ( $n = 2$ ) discussed opportunities they have experienced in meeting other mentors from other schools as part of the program.

Having a role as a Fourth R mentor, I've been able to meet new people, whether it be my mentees or other mentors. So, especially last year when I was doing training...I got to meet other people from other schools. I got to meet other people that I haven't seen in a long time. (Male Participant #1)

***Family relationships.*** This sub-theme was in five interview excerpts and was referenced by two interview participants. Family relationships were coded when a participant discussed current relationships with family. The two mentors spoke of their positive relationships with family and influential family mentors in their lives.

The older mentors in my life, they're more of like my go-to helpers. You know, they inspire me to be all that I can be and they show me...what I'm capable of doing and they teach me or they show me a lot of life lessons and by telling me their experiences...also showing me how...a young Anishinabe woman should be. (Female Participant #3)

One participant identified her willingness to seek help from her parents and counsellors at school when in need as a direct result of her participation in the program.

***Relationships with Fourth R staff.*** This sub-theme was used to indicate when a participant discussed current relationships with Fourth R staff (such as mentoring staff) as providing support. This sub-theme was applied to four excerpts and was referenced by two participants. Both respondents spoke highly of the Fourth R staff.

\_\_\_\_\_ (Fourth R staff) ...is Aboriginal himself and he's trying to do so much to eliminate the stigma as well as make kids feel safe and make a better community within their schools for Aboriginal kids...I have a lot of pride for him and what he's doing. (Female Participant #10)

One participant discussed the encouragement she received from the Fourth R adult program facilitator:

In Grade 11, when I was a mentee, it was really rough because there was a lot of bullying. So, I skipped a lot of classes...they (Fourth R staff) helped me come here...they told me that I could still come but they told me that I had to start going to class and it helped me get back on track with what I needed to do. (Female Participant #11)

***Relationships with other trusted adults.*** This sub-theme was applied to four excerpts and was considered current relationships with other trusted adults, such as school staff (i.e., not Fourth R staff or family member), as providing support.

The reason I look up to \_\_\_\_\_ (teacher) is because...she's on the outside of things. And being not Aboriginal and still trying to help and still putting in so much effort

to make sure that we have what we need and more, that makes me so happy that somebody's doing that. (Female Participant #10)

**Culture.** This theme noted any general discussion of culture by the youth mentor and was applied to 40 interview excerpts. Further coding revealed three sub-themes:

***Cultural practices.*** This sub-theme was coded when mentors discussed specific cultural practices, such as smudging. This theme was mentioned by ten participants and coded in 19 excerpts. Most participants ( $n = 8$ ) discussed increased exposure to cultural practices since becoming involved in the program.

The only time I'm pretty much smudge nowadays is when I come here for Fourth R meetings...and I like when how \_\_\_\_\_ (Fourth R staff) talks about the teachings and sometimes he'll bring out the Medicine Wheel and we'll have a good group discussion. (Female Participant #2)

One mentor furthered, "It's a lot of field trips and stuff. We do smudging and other cool stuff. You get to learn about the culture more and what they (past Indigenous generations) had to deal with and all the stuff they had" (Male Participant #8). Most participants ( $n = 7$ ) identified the importance they believed their engagement or re-engagement in cultural practices held for themselves and others in their lives.

Before that (the program) ...I knew...a lot of my culture through pow-wow dancing...because I come from a lot of tribes. That's what I'm made up of, seven different tribes. One of them was Ojibway, which I don't really know anything about...I learned a little bit from that (the program) because they do Ojibway practicing. So, in terms of smudging, and their beliefs, and the Seven Grandfather

Teachings, that's very important...I've learned more about that through mentoring. (Male Participant #1).

**Cultural identity.** This sub-theme noted discussion of band identity, cultural lineage or personal identity pertaining to culture. Cultural identity was discussed by eight mentors and applied to 13 excerpts. Six participants who discussed this sub-theme spoke of their comfort in their cultural identities. One participant commented, "I'm Métis. I don't really have to look Native to be Native" (Male participant #8). Another mentor commented:

I think that over the program, as well as last year's program, I've really been able to look at myself and say, "You know...you are allowed to call yourself Métis, or allowed to call yourself Aboriginal, because you feel it, because you know what you are" (Female Participant #10)

One mentor spoke of her confidence in her cultural identity, "I guess one of the benefits I have had is people take me more seriously as a young woman and also as a young woman that is in tune, to an extent, with her culture" (Female participant #6).

**Cultural togetherness.** This sub-theme was coded in seven excerpts and reflected participant ( $n = 7$ ) discussion of cultural togetherness (e.g., participation as a cultural group). One participant cited a sense of belongingness the mentoring group provided him. Some students ( $n = 3$  participants) spoke of the comfort and engagement in being together as a group.

I'm not sure what exactly it is, but just like I think it's just being around my people and being able to spread the knowledge...it makes us more as one and makes it stronger for the generations to come... Especially with culture, because we don't exactly know a lot about it because being stripped so long ago, we just try to re-



learn it. Instead of Natives tearing each other down, I would rather build everybody up with our same teachings as our Elders grew up with. (Female Participant #4)

One mentor desired more Indigenous students to become involved in the program and encouraged non-Indigenous peers to join as well:

I'm most proud that, not just like a peer mentor myself but as a group, when we come together, I'm proud that it's Native people who are coming together to become mentors for other people in the community. We should be more open to more than FNMI (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) people as well. So, I think that's pretty awesome. (Female Participant, #2)

**Aspirations.** This theme was coded in 17 excerpts throughout the youth mentor participant interview transcripts. Aspirations were coded when mentors discussed any future goals or ambitions. This theme was further coded into three sub-themes:

***Personal aspirations.*** This sub-theme was applied to eight excerpts and recorded participant ( $n = 7$ ) discussion of any future goals or aspirations of a personal nature (e.g., family, cultural). Mentors discussed ( $n = 7$  participants) their desire to teach others about culture and cultural practices. One mentor commented, “I plan on joining a club when I go to (post-secondary) school, or making a club...I want to teach people how to pow-wow dance” (Male Participant #1). Others ( $n = 4$  participants) discussed their aspirations to continue their personal journeys of cultural knowledge. One participant who resides off a reserve noted:

I'm definitely working more to being more in touch with my culture and seeing how in touch they are (peers who live on a reserve) and what the (cultural) benefits that they get from it (living on a reserve) really inspires me to be more in touch with it (culture). (Female Participant #6)

Many ( $n = 3$  participants) discussed their confidence in their abilities to be a leader as they move forward in their lives.

I feel like I'm already pretty culturally connected...but through the peer mentoring I've been able to help share my experiences and my knowledge on the culture with others who don't get the opportunities that I do to participate in ceremonies or cultural events and traditional dancing and singing. So, it's really important to me that I'm able to teach that to the younger generations because if I don't then, you know, who will? (Female Participant #3)

**Professional aspirations.** This sub-theme was defined as discussion of future goals or aspirations of a professional nature (e.g., employment, fields of interest) identified by participants. Professional aspirations were applied to five excerpts and discussed by four participants. One participant wished to enter a trade profession and two participants spoke directly about their desire to enter a career in a helping profession.

I want to become a \_\_\_\_\_ (career in a helping profession). And this (the program) has helped me talk to people about ways to do things differently. It's like if you're scared to talk to your parents about something then you can come talk to me... (Female Participant #11)

**Academic aspirations.** This sub-theme was used to indicate any future goals or aspirations of an academic nature (e.g., post-secondary education) and was applied to five excerpts. Three female participants discussed their academic aspirations and goal to attend university, of which one had already been accepted. Of her academic aspirations, one mentor said, "I think being a mentor...it does help me further develop these skills for the future because

I'm going into a hard university (and) a hard career field" (Female Participant #6). One mentor expanded on her confidence in her ability to help others when in higher education:

...I think not only for myself being able to do that (seek help) when I have a problem, but say I'm in university and I have another student who's not doing so well, being able to help them knowing what steps to take as a mentor. (Female participant #10)

**Previous mentoring experience.** Participants with no previous mentoring experience spoke more frequently of the program's influence of cultural togetherness and family relationships, and significantly more about their relationships with the Fourth R staff and other trusted adults compared to those with mentoring experience. Returning Uniting Our Nations mentors comprised 81% ( $n = 9$  participants) of the sample. Mentors with previous experience mentoring with the program spoke more frequently of their personal aspirations, compared to those with no mentoring experience, and more frequently about their cultural identity and family contributions.

**Thematic analysis summary.** Thematic analysis of the data provided insight into the youth mentors' perceived benefits of their participation in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program. Personal and school contributions were noted most frequently with comments on improved mentor self-confidence, as well as belief in their roles to evoke positive change in their lives and the lives of others. Further, the mentors reported their awareness as role models and this positively influenced how they conducted themselves as school. Increased contact with peers and peer relationship development was frequently cited as a benefit from the mentoring role. Mentors discussed the program's influence on their cultural identities, exposure to cultural practices (e.g. smudging), and how getting together as a group of Indigenous students

was helpful. Finally, some mentors discussed their personal aspirations to teach others of their cultures.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this mixed methods case study was to investigate the benefits of youth serving as mentors to younger peers in the culturally relevant Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program. The goal of this project was to highlight the youth voice in identifying how being a peer mentor has benefitted them and influenced them. It was predicted that through the experience of mentoring younger peers, mentor participants would perceive an increase in intrapersonal (i.e. self-perception, self-confidence, relationship with self) and interpersonal (i.e. relationships with others, self-advocacy skills) development, as well as increased connectedness to school and culture. Further, it was predicted that as a result of participation, mentors would recognize themselves as role models to their younger mentees.

In the Spring of 2017, data were collected from 11 peer mentors (ages 16-18) from two TVDSB schools that hosted the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program. It was the first experience as a mentor for two participants and nine participants had previously been mentors the year before. This study utilized two research methods, semi-structured interviews and concept mapping, for youth to discuss, interpret, and make meaning of the data. Semi-structured interviews asked youth mentors to discuss the perceived benefits of being a mentor, as well as additional questions relating to their mentoring experiences and the influence the role had on different areas of their lives (e.g. school, self-perception, culture). Responses to the concept mapping focus question asking of general benefits attributed to the mentoring role produced 56 unique statements. The results produced the best statistical fit displayed in a 3-cluster map with clusters labelled, (a) Making Cultural Connections, (b) Benefits to Self, and (c)

Relationships with Family and Friends. The data indicated that the mentor participants identified 33% ( $n = 19$ ) of the statements to be of high importance (4.00 or higher) relative to the benefits of mentoring, with statements most frequently identified highly important ( $n = 9$ ) within the Making Cultural Connections cluster. A thematic analysis was conducted with the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, including the focus question, and revealed overarching themes of (a) Contributions, (b) Relationships, (c) Culture, and (d) Aspirations. While the findings from the interviews provided a general snapshot of the perceived benefits of mentoring for the youth mentors, it was through concept mapping that mentors identified culture to have high importance relative to the other interview themes.

### **Benefits of Complementary Methods**

One strength of this study was the use of multiple methodologies. Each of the two methods has its specific advantages. The concept mapping has the advantage of providing a blank canvas for participants to add their voices in response to a single statement (versus more structured questions that might create certain demand characteristics). It also adds the mapping component that shows how participants view the main themes (versus other methods where the researcher imposes the themes). Finally, it adds a quantitative ranking of importance. These mixed methods provide complementarity by utilizing the concept mapping to elaborate and clarify the comments made in the interviews (Andrew & Halcomb, 2007). Conversely, the semi-structured interviews provided nuance and depth in responses with opportunity for me to prompt and cue in different areas. Also, the interview questions covered a broader range of topics. They also provided an opportunity for youth to say that there was no benefit in a particular area (versus trying to interpret the absence of comments in a particular area in the concept mapping question). Finally, where concept mapping responses are reduced to single statements, responses

to semi-structured interview questions are used within context and provide richer examples of the themes. Using the two methods increased the validity of findings because of the degree of overlap, but also highlighted some important distinctions based on methodological approach.

Returning the data to the youth as owners of the information and for their identification of what was of importance is consistent with Indigenous research methods (see Canadian Institutes for Health Research, 2014; The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014). The concept mapping approach revealed that youth felt the mentoring program helped them to connect more to their culture, a finding recognized as salient during interviews but not identified as important. When mentors were presented with the 56 unique statements to the focus question, they became aware of how their peers had responded. The culture-related statements provided by peers may have resonated with mentors, and perhaps could have provided new concepts to ponder or expanded their thoughts as per the benefits of mentoring.

My review of the interviews via coding without use of the concept mapping procedures would have resulted in my interpretation of moderate priority of the cultural component, as culture was prompted in one of the nine semi-structured interview questions. This finding supports the youth desire for and value in cultural relevance in Indigenous youth programming (Crooks et al., 2015, 2017; Hackett et al., 2016; Parent, 2011) and further parallels Crooks et al.'s (2017) mentee findings of cultural learning thorough exposure to cultural practices and togetherness with Indigenous peers. Only through the use of mixed methods was the value of the student-identified cultural connection component identified. Conversely, findings that were highlighted in the interviews that otherwise did not emerge as highly important in the concept mapping procedures included mentor improved self-confidence and self-efficacy, future aspirations, and mentor recognition of their positions as role models in their schools.

The cultural relevancy of Indigenous youth programming (Parent, 2011; Hackett et al., 2016), including that of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program (Crooks et al., 2015, 2017), recognizes the importance of mentorship within Indigenous cultures, especially the mentorship of community Elders (Archibald, 2008; Blackstock et al., 2004; Parent, 2011). Participants were not asked explicitly about the role of the Fourth R adult Indigenous facilitator; nonetheless, this person was identified as a mentor by the youth and was believed to be instrumental to student comfort and engagement in the group. In their own mentoring roles to younger peers, the mentors reported a heightened sense of self-confidence in how they perceive themselves, as well as improvements in how they conduct themselves at school. Mentors also perceived themselves as role models in their families and communities. Youth mentors perceived their positions as role models to have influenced their improved self-trust in making decisions that will affect their futures, including the desire to teach others about their cultures. This mixed methods analysis supported that culture is not only highly important to the peer mentors, but a key part of their identity that they wished to build on and take with them into their futures.

### **Parallels to Previous Research**

This study confirmed youth-reported value and meaning in culturally relevant programming. The youth mentors identified that through the mentoring program, both as mentors to younger mentees and informal mentees to the adult facilitator, they connected or reconnected with their cultures through exposure to traditional activities and teachings. These findings parallel the “Going Off, Growing Strong” program (Hackett et al., 2016) that emphasized traditional practices to engage Inuit youth, as well as Parent’s (2011) study of holistic programming for youth that found youth appreciation of support through a sense of group belonging and mentorship. In addition, the mentors of the current study reported improvements

in relationships with peers, family, and community which parallels the programming goals of Muise and Mackey's (2017) study of a provincial police program to strengthen relationships among families, schools, and community. Similarly, the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program sought to engage Indigenous students with the education system and strengthen relationships between students and school (e.g. peers, families, school staff, Fourth R staff, etc.) and encourage commitment to continued study.

The results of this investigation of benefits to Indigenous peer mentors echoed previous research of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring programs that focused on mentees. This study's focus on mentors found similar results to Crooks et al.'s (2017) investigation of improvements to mentee intrapersonal and interpersonal development, and cultural and healthy relationship learning. Intrapersonal development was observed in improved self-perception, including self-confidence and self-acceptance, as well as mentor-reported clarity and confidence in trusting themselves to make decisions for their futures. Many mentor comments during the interviews spoke to their comfort and confidence in their personal and cultural identities. Youth reflection on their cultural identities confirmed that culturally relevant programming in schools, such as the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program, encourages students to embrace their culture *and* be successful students (Crooks et al., 2015b). The concept mapping analysis echoed student intrapersonal growth particularly with the highly-rated importance statements that spoke of the program's positive influence on students' choices, sense of belongingness, and desire to help others found within the Benefits to Self cluster. Statements within this cluster were sorted together by the participants most consistently of any other cluster. In other words, the mentors collectively believed the statements belonged together.



The current study found significant mentor-reported improvements to peer relationships as a result of participation in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program. These improved peer relationships served as a link to improved connectedness to school through participation in other school programming, such as cooperative education placements and extracurricular school opportunities. Healthy and positive relationships with peers was cited as contributory to mentor comfort in help-seeking and self-advocacy skills, similar to Crooks et al., (2017) themed mentee findings of improved healthy relationship learning. Mentors discussed their awareness of when to seek help as well as identified family and school contacts to receive help when required. Results of the concept mapping analysis Relationships with Family and Friends cluster supported interpersonal growth through students' desire to teach others as well as their availability to support others, especially peers. Mentors also reflected on their roles as role models to their younger peers through demonstrating improved academic commitment and behavioural conduct at school, the latter also found in another mentor investigation (Crooks et al., 2015b). When asked directly, five mentors reported the program had no influence on their academics; however, although some mentors may not have explicitly identified a link, the results demonstrate support through improved attendance, participation in school opportunities, and role modelling behaviours for the program's influence on their academics.

Further, this study echoed the two themed findings of Crooks and colleagues (2015a) qualitative investigation of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programming adult stakeholders. The adult stakeholders' identification of the importance of identity and belonging (first theme) was well communicated by students in the current study through discussion of Indigenous mentors coming together as a group to mentor others. Building cultural connectedness to facilitate student self-perception as confident and successful leaders (second theme) was also

confirmed through student meaning-making in this study. Culture was identified as the most important theme relating to benefits experienced via mentor participation in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program, as mentors reflected on the opportunities to participate in cultural activities and teachings, such as smudging and learning of the Seven Grandfather Teachings.

**Previous mentoring experience.** Differences were observed among mentors with previous mentoring experience in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program and mentors with no previous experience. Mentors with previous mentoring experience ( $n = 9$ ) spoke more frequently of their cultural identity than did first-time mentors ( $n = 2$ ) and more often discussed their personal, professional and academic aspirations within the interviews. This could be indicative of the experienced mentors' older age, maturity, and approaching post-secondary plans compared to the younger mentors' position in life. Aspirations was an unexpected concept discussed by mentors, especially older mentors, that was otherwise not sought through research goals, data collection or analysis. Responses coded as aspirations were typically discussed by mentors when asked if mentoring had helped their perception of themselves in the future.

Mentors with no previous mentoring experience spoke more frequently of the mentoring program's influence on cultural togetherness, as well as their relationships with family, Fourth R staff, and other trusted adults. This observation could be indicative of new mentors' immersion in cultural experience and education as part of the program's curriculum. It is possible that the program's cultural experience may not seem as salient for experienced mentors having become accustomed to the educational experience. Student participants with no reported mentoring experience also spoke more frequently of their family relationships, compared to those with previous mentoring experience, and significantly more about their relationships with the Fourth R staff and other trusted adults.

The current study revealed a possible developmental difference among mentors with previous mentoring experience and mentors with no prior experience. New mentors reported an increase in supportive relationships through family, Fourth R staff and other trusted adults, as a result of participation in the program. In addition, new mentors more frequently reported experiences of cultural togetherness with Fourth R staff and Indigenous peers. New mentors found connection and support through their relationships with peers and trusted adults which appeared to transform to a deeper understanding of self and identity for returning mentors. Interestingly, this transition from new-mentor support from others to experienced-mentor understanding of self parallels Crooks et al., (2017) study of Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations mentees who reported significantly better mental health and cultural identity scores for those with two years of mentoring experience than those with one year experience as a mentee or no mentoring at all. It is possible that as these mentors became accustomed to their mentoring roles, they experienced improved confidence and perception of ability in influencing their younger peers.

Although youth mentoring programs have been found to be less effective than programs with adult mentors in sustaining the long-term effects of program goals (DuBois et al., 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008), the improved benefits observed with second-year mentees (Crooks et al., 2017) suggests that the cultural relevance component may set the longitudinal outcomes of programming for Indigenous youth apart from other programs. In other words, the benefits perceived by mentees (Crooks et al., 2017) and mentors, as evidenced by this study's returning mentors, appear to strengthen participant self-perception and cultural identity with each year of programming involvement. These traits translate into confidences in ability and perception of leadership roles which further fosters participant self-confidence and future aspirations. Noted by

Parent (2011), cultural relevance may be the key to Indigenous youth engagement in programming that “keeps them coming back for more.” The potential for stronger impacts found among adult-youth matches may be balanced out and achieved with culturally-matched mentors.

### **Benefits to Youth Mentors through Meeting Program Goals**

The current study’s investigation into the benefits of mentoring revealed responses that reflected and aligned with Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program goals.

**Leadership opportunities.** The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program goals seek to encourage student engagement and connection to school through positive leadership opportunities (Crooks et al., 2015b; Lapp et al., 2016). Data provided by mentors confirmed this study’s hypothesis that students would perceive themselves as role models in their schools, evidenced by mentor awareness of their influence on younger peers. Mentors communicated their awareness of their influence on their mentees, particularly with their behavioural conduct at school and display of academic initiative. In addition, mentors felt respected and believed others sought their input and advice as a direct result of their mentoring role. This finding is consistent with past research of youth mentors feeling valued in their leadership role and positive influence on mentor self-concept and behaviour (Crooks et al., 2015b).

**Connection to culture.** Improved connection to culture and cultural identity was another program goal (Crooks et al., 2015a) achieved in the youth mentor investigation. Identified as the most important concept derived through the current investigation of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program, students valued their exposure to cultural practices and believed the program’s cultural togetherness fostered their cultural identities. Further, new mentors’ perception of increased cultural togetherness also confirms the program’s success in striving for this goal. Some students reported they only smudged when with the mentoring group

and others reported ease in being with other Indigenous peers in a group setting. Some mentors spoke of their strength in their acceptance of self and comfort in their cultural identities.

**Participation in education.** Supportive of the traditional use of mentorship (Archibald, 2008; Blackstock et al., 2004; Parent, 2011), the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program seeks to engage participants in structured programming that encourages participation in education and pursuit of long-term educational goals. This was particularly evident in mentor interview data that supported their favourable perception of the program's Indigenous facilitator as a mentor, the program's influence on mentor conduct at school, and improved commitment to their studies. In addition, many mentors, especially those who had previous mentoring experience, spoke of their future personal, professional and academic aspirations.

**Positive relationships.** The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program encouraged positive and healthy relationships, with an emphasis on specific instruction of healthy relationship skills (such as assertive communication and active listening), student self-advocacy, and help-seeking behaviours (Crooks et al., 2017). This was evidenced by frequent mentor discussion of improved peer relationships, as well as confidence in identifying challenges and seeking adult support. Developing positive relationships and increased comfort at school are both goals of the program (Crooks et al., 2015b).

### **Consideration of Including Non-Indigenous Mentors**

As any program researcher or facilitator can attest to, the study of people is never flawless but instead provides data rich with the complexities of human interaction. In other words, the messiness of the real lived experience can be observed wherever programming is facilitated. Within this study, the researcher became aware through the adult mentoring facilitator as well as through interview confirmation that one mentor identified as non-Indigenous. The

adult facilitator noted one of the mentors was non-Indigenous but did not identify the student. During the interview, it emerged that the mentor was non-Indigenous. He explained that he volunteered for the role as mentor in the program to be with his Indigenous friend. At the end of the first semester the non-Indigenous mentor advised the adult facilitator that he identified as Caucasian. The non-Indigenous mentor was welcomed to continue his role as a youth mentor for the second semester as he had been a valuable contributor in his mentoring role throughout the first semester. The youth was accepted in the program and thrived. Further, the non-Indigenous youth discussed value in learning of Indigenous cultural practices, albeit not in the same transformative way that was discussed by some of his Indigenous peers. In that way, although this youth was a mentor, he was also a mentee of other youth in learning cultural practices and teachings. In this example, the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program was not viewed solely as a program for Indigenous youth, but instead as a culturally relevant program to engage all youth; all students can benefit from learning about Indigenous history, cultural practices and traditions. Of note, some of the program's activities encourage outreach work and is open to non-Indigenous students.

Interestingly, it does not appear that mentors have to be Indigenous for Indigenous mentees to reap the benefits of what mentoring can provide, as was found in the adult-youth matches in the Big Brothers Big Sisters study, even though culturally-matched mentors may provide a bigger benefit (see DeWit et al., 2017). Although further investigation is required, the current study provided an example of success with a non-Indigenous mentor. This study was a snapshot of the greater successes and learning that occurs for students in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program. As a researcher looking inwards, the interviews and sorting activities I conducted with the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations mentors will never be fully

encapsulated, nor fully understood, as only the mentor participants can know the true program accomplishments (Crooks et al., 2010b; Nakkula & Harris, 2010). However, this study did reveal a window to the real-lived experiences (Crooks et al., 2017) of the youth mentors as they reflected on the benefits of their roles.

### **Limitations**

Although this study provides insight into the perceptions of personal and program success, some limitations are noted. First, the study had a small sample size. Granted the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program is currently facilitated in three local schools, of which only two were investigated, perhaps the data would look different if the study included more students, although there are no rules about sample size in qualitative studies (Patton, 2015) and the number of interviews is considered satisfactory. The number of new mentors was particularly small ( $n = 2$ ), so comparisons between new and experienced mentors are particularly tentative. Second, longitudinal data and more objective measures would provide a more rounded case study. Longitudinal investigation by multi-year involvement may be beneficial to inform the longevity of the effects experienced by the role as a youth mentor. Additional measures (e.g. attendance records) would inform youth mentor commitment to schooling beyond the mentoring program. Graduation records would provide information regarding student graduation rates and the length of time it took students to complete their schooling. These data could be compared with a peer control group to note differences resulting from student participation in culturally relevant youth programming. Third, this study possessed sample bias. As the youth mentors volunteered to participate in the study, it is possible that this subgroup of mentors viewed the program more favourably. In addition, the requirement for parental consent can be a source of

sample bias as only students with parents supportive of research (or those 18 and older) could participate.

### **Implications for Future Research and Programming**

Programs designed for Indigenous youth appear to be most successful in engaging youth when they possess cultural relevance that introduces or reintroduces them to cultural practices and traditions, as well as provides access to community Elders (see Crooks et al., 2015, 2017; DeWit et al., 2017; Parent, 2011; Hackett et al., 2016). The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program, a part of the larger Fourth R program, is a culturally relevant program designed to encourage healthy relationships and provide culturally relevant opportunities for Indigenous students (Crooks et al., 2010b). Although youth mentoring in general has been found to provide youth mentors with leadership (Karcher, 2008) and prosocial skills, the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program is not a one-size-fits-all program. The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program is a specialized program that was designed to engage Indigenous secondary school-aged students (Crooks et al., 2010a), who are a part of a cultural group that has been traditionally marginalized by the education system (Gunn et al., 2011).

Future investigation into implications of culturally relevant school-based program implementation begins with the school environment, such as the degree to which Indigenous students can see themselves reflected in their school culture and school staff commitment to reducing the barriers to learning for Indigenous students. Of culturally relevant school-based programming for Indigenous students, further research is required to explore the role of non-Indigenous youth mentors matched with Indigenous mentees, as was found to be a successful in adult-youth matches in a Big Brother Big Sisters study (DeWit et al., 2017). Continued



investigation of use of non-Indigenous mentors, especially within school-based youth matches, may provide insights that affect group cohesiveness and expectation of awareness of Indigenous cultural knowledge and traditions.

Future directions may include the invitation of non-Indigenous youth to participate in the program to examine the impacts of more diverse groups. As part of an inclusive model of education, the involvement of all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, may be welcomed but with caution. If open to all, the very program created to engage Indigenous youth with the education system that has perpetuated social and cultural injustices for generations of Indigenous families may eventually lose sight of the program's ultimate goal to engage Indigenous youth. Further, if open to all, there is concern that the program will lose meaning for Indigenous youth and may no longer be "...a safe place for students that feel like they don't have a place," as best said by a female participant. However, there may be a middle ground in involving non-Indigenous students as allies of Indigenous programming to both expand their own knowledge of Indigenous practices and worldviews and assist in bringing cultural awareness to the school body (including improvements to seeing Indigenous cultures as part of the fabric of the school).

Second, it would be interesting to follow youth mentors by interviewing them more frequently over a two-year span to observe the developmental processes of the leadership role and identify what changes are observed between the first and second years as mentors. Interestingly, Crooks et al. (2017) found that program mentees with two years of mentoring experience reported significantly better mental health and cultural identity than those with one year experience as a mentee or with no mentoring at all. In other words, it wasn't until two years of participation that mentee benefits in cultural identity and mental health were significantly improved. The increasingly positive effects observed with each year of mentoring program

participation, as observed in the investigation of program mentees (Crooks et al., 2017), suggests that the cultural component of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program may serve as a key factor in participant self-concept and cultural identity.

Third, future research may consider alternative forms of communication for data collection, beyond that of verbal interviews. Two participants struggled to communicate their words during their interviews. One interviewee spoke of his desire for another way to convey his thoughts, such as through music. Possible communication mediums may be through participant use of video recording or photography to document his/her experiences both at school and in the community, or utilizing art and music as a method to convey thoughts. Castleden, Garvin and Huu-ay-aht First Nation's (2008) investigated the use of Photovoice, a data collection method used in community-based participatory research to allow research participants to document their experiences. Use of Photovoice as a culturally relevant tool creates a sense of ownership for participants, as well as respects cultural preferences. Photovoice has been used successfully to give a voice to underserved populations to communicate with people who hold power in policy-related decision making that will ultimately affect them (Castleden et al., 2008). Future research may consider the use of alternate communication mediums to better understand the experiences of Indigenous youth, at school, at home, and in their communities, as documented through their eyes.

### **Conclusion**

Programs created to engage and empower Indigenous youth within the school system can support personal growth, and provide connectedness to culture and school. Culturally relevant programming provides a platform for marginalized students to explore their identities and develop supports within the school. This study hypothesized that student participation in the

Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations peer mentoring program would improve mentor intrapersonal and interpersonal development, and increase their connectedness to school and culture. Findings suggested that youth mentors benefitted from their participation and their involvement in the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations program did, indeed, improve these facets of the mentors' lives. The interviews and sorting activity provided students two ways to convey their voice – both through responding to interview questions and subsequently by grouping and rating statements. The concept mapping analysis of this study encouraged the youth mentors to interpret and make meaning of the qualitative data resulting in their identification of highest importance in the program's cultural component. It also provides somewhat of an opportunity for input from youth who had difficulty verbalizing their experiences, even though it is not as satisfactory as providing alternative creative avenues.

This study contributes to the growing field of studies evaluating the impact of culturally relevant program by describing the benefits experienced by mentors. Mentors communicated their satisfaction with increased exposure to cultural practices through the program and interest in convening as a group with other Indigenous peers. Most mentors discussed their comfort and confidence in their cultural identities and many referenced their desire to teach others of their cultural knowledge and continue their own cultural journeys. Findings from this study support the use of adult Indigenous facilitators to lead youth programming. As was demonstrated in other studies, the adult Indigenous facilitator in the current study was well received by youth mentors who viewed him as a role model and respected leader in communicating his knowledge of culture.

Finally, there is benefit in engaging Indigenous youth in culturally relevant programming at school, as part of a larger goal in connecting youth to education and encouraging pursuit of

higher education. Providing programming for Indigenous youth at school encourages a visible representation of Indigenous culture within the school climate while both engaging Indigenous students and creating cultural awareness for non-Indigenous students. It is also an act of decolonization in the school setting in that it creates space for and honours the inclusion of Indigenous cultural identities. The current study demonstrated that culturally relevant school-based peer mentoring programs can encourage Indigenous student connection to school, specifically through improved peer relationships. Further, this link to improved connection to school was evidenced by mentor-reported improved behavioural conduct at school and improved academic commitment resulting from their awareness of their positions as role models to younger peers. Youth mentors reported that their participation in the peer mentoring program positively influenced their school attendance and participation in other school-related opportunities. This research investigating the benefits of a youth mentoring role aimed to contribute to the strengths-based body that supports Indigenous youth identity development, cultural connectedness, and leadership potential.

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## Appendix A: Western University Office of Research Ethics Approval Letter



**Western  
Research**

Research Ethics

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board  
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Claire Crooks  
**Department & Institution:** Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 108905  
**Study Title:** A Mixed Methods Evaluation of Benefits for Indigenous Youth Mentors in a High School Peer Mentoring Program  
**Sponsor:** Public Health Agency of Canada

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** February 13, 2017  
**NMREB Expiry Date:** February 13, 2018

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol	Received February 6, 2017	
Other	Debrief form	2017/01/05
Other	A Pre-training questionnaire	2016/12/08
Instruments	Interview Guide	2017/01/05
Caregiver Letter of Information & Consent	revised parent / guardian LOI and consent	2017/02/05
Letter of Information & Consent	youth consent for 18+ (new)	2017/02/05
Assent		2017/02/05

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 0000941.

**Appendix B: Thames Valley District School Board Research and Assessment Approval**

3 Apr 2017

Dear Claire Crooks:

Your project, entitled "A Mixed Methods Evaluation of Benefits for Indigenous Youth Mentors in a High School Peer Mentoring Program" has been approved by Research and Assessment Services at the Thames Valley District School Board. Please ensure that all members of your research team who will be assisting with data collection involving students have an up-to-date criminal record check. You are welcome to begin data collection for your study.

The continued willingness of our families and staff to participate in research studies is greatly enhanced by pertinent feedback of findings. It is suggested that direct feedback be provided to the school(s), staff, students, and/or families involved in the study. Please find attached the Thames Valley District School Board Study Completion Form. Once you have completed your research in our board, please complete this form and submit it to Research and Assessment Services. This form should be submitted within two years of receiving approval. If the study is not completed within two years of the date on this letter, please submit a study extension request to Dr. Sarah Folino.

All the best with your research. Please feel free to contact me if I can be of further assistance.



**Appendix C: Western University Office of Research Ethics Amendment Approval Letter**
**Western  
Research**

Research Ethics

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board  
NMREB Amendment Approval Notice**
**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Claire Crooks

**Department & Institution:** Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 108905

**Study Title:** A Mixed Methods Evaluation of Benefits for Indigenous Youth Mentors in a High School Peer Mentoring Program

**Sponsor:** Public Health Agency of Canada

**NMREB Revision Approval Date:** April 12, 2017

**NMREB Expiry Date:** February 13, 2018

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Appendix D - LOI/Consent 18+ participants	2017/03/23
Revised Assent	Appendix E - Assent	2017/03/23
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Appendix C - Parent LOI/Consent	2017/03/23

The Western University Non-Medical Science Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the amendment to the above named study, as of the NMREB Amendment Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

### Appendix D: Interview Guide

#### Concept Mapping Question:

Thinking about the many people and places in your life, as well as your own journey of personal growth, in what ways has your role as a peer mentor benefitted your life?

#### Benefits for youth being mentored

What are you most proud of about your role as a mentor?

#### Personal reflection

Has your role as a youth mentor helped you at school in any way? (Prompt: With academics? With non-academics?)

Has your role as a youth mentor helped your perception of yourself in the here and now? (Prompt: Have your views of yourself over the course of the program changed?)

Has your role as a youth mentor helped your perception of yourself in the future? (Prompt: Do you think differently about yourself or your capabilities as you head into your future?)

Has your role as a youth mentor helped your connection with your culture? (Prompt: Since mentoring, have you become more interested or involved in cultural practices or events?)

Do you have any mentors in your life? If so, what does your mentor bring to your life? If not, what do you wish a mentor could bring to your life?

Have you experienced any benefits as a result of your role as a youth mentor?

As we conclude this interview. Do you have any final thoughts or comments?

(Adapted from Crooks et al., 2015b)

### Appendix E: Peer Mentoring Draft Codebook (Version 4)

**Contributions:** use this code to indicate current participant contributions attributed to participation as a mentor in the mentoring program. Example: “...helped me gain back my confidence getting back what I needed to get back to be successful.”

- Community Contributions: contribution to community events or activities, or involvement in community culture as attributed to participation as a mentor in the mentoring program. Example: “It’s helped me construct my role in my community...”
- Family Contributions: contribution to family events or activities as attributed to participation as a mentor in the mentoring program. Example: “It’s also helped me for home...if anyone ever needed something or somebody to talk to...I could be there.”
- School Contributions: involvement in school activities or their studies. Example: “So it’s important to me that, not only for myself to do the best that I can in school but to show others that you know to be all that they can be as well.”
  - Attendance: participants noted that the program helped their attendance at school. Example: “...I don’t want to end up missing school to miss it (program).”
  - Cognitive: discussions of changes in cognition or attention attributed to participation. Example: “...it does help me focus more.”
  - Role models: discussion of awareness of self as a role model and leader. Includes discussion of how mentor conducts him/herself at school. Example: “...the way I carry myself in school situations...has helped me lead better.”
  - Participation in School Opportunities: discussion of participation in other school programming. Example: “...it helps me know how to talk to the students that I’m working with right now in my co-op placement...”
  - Academics: discussion of positive influence or no influence at all on academic performance. Example: “...education-wise, like getting my work done...that helped me to have that goal...help strive to do better in school”
- Personal Contributions: discussion of new contributions of a personal nature, the participant attributes to the role of mentor in the mentoring program. This can include skills the participant has learned. Example: “... I’m teaching them but they’re also teaching me...”
  - Knowledge/Skill Acquisition: discussion of new/improved knowledge or skill acquisition. Example: “...being a mentor does help me...further develop these skills.”
  - Self-Appreciation: discussion of improved view of self, including self-trust and self-confidence. Example: “It’s helped with my self-esteem a lot and my self-confidence.”
  - Self-Efficacy: discussion of belief in ability to affect change/improvements in self or lives of others. Example: “...being able to identify when something is wrong as well as being able to appropriately handle it and know who to go to.”
  - No Contributions: discussion of no influence of personal contribution. Example: “...my views of myself have not changed.”

**Aspirations:** use this code to indicate any future goals or ambitions identified by the participant. Example: *“I see myself going places...”*

- Personal Aspirations: use this code to indicate any future goals or ambitions of a personal nature (e.g., family, cultural) identified by the participant attributed to participation as a mentor in the mentoring program. Example: *“I want to bring it (culture)back... that's why I'm also learning how to speak Ojibway.”*
- Academic Aspirations: use this code to indicate any future goals or ambitions of an academic nature (e.g., school, post-secondary) identified by the participant attributed to participation as a mentor in the mentoring program. Example: *“I'm hoping to go to [university] for [program].”*
- Professional Aspirations: use this code to indicate any future goals or ambitions of a professional nature (e.g., employment, fields of interest) identified by the participant attributed to participation as a mentor in the mentoring program. Example: *“...I'm going into... a hard career field.”*

**Relationships:** this code is used to indicate the variety of current relationships participants discuss. Example: *“Because it helps me know how to talk to the students...”*

- Family Relationships: use this code to indicate when a participant is discussing current relationships with family as providing support. Example: *“... it has made me feel more open to talking about my problems to my parents and to my counsellors...”*
- Relationships with Fourth R Staff: use this code to indicate when a participant is discussing current relationships with Fourth R staff (such as mentoring staff) as providing support. Example: *“It's given me a good connection with \_\_\_\_\_ (Fourth R staff)”*
- Relationships with Other Trusted Adults: use this code to indicate when a participant is discussing current relationships with other trusted adults, such as school staff (i.e., not a Fourth R staff or family member) as providing support. Example: *“...it has made me feel more open to talking about my problems to...my counsellors...”*
- Peer Relationships: use this code to indicate when a participant is discussing current relationships with peers as providing support. Example: *“I'm most proud that all the students in the room are friends with me.”*

**Culture:** any general discussion of culture by the participant. Example: *“I'm proud that it's Native people who are coming together to become mentors for other people in the community...”*

- Cultural Practices/Teachings: discussion of specific cultural practices. Example: *“...it's always nice to be able to smudge...”*
- Cultural Togetherness: indicate discussion of cultural togetherness (e.g., participation as a cultural group) Example: *“...being able to stay in contact with the Indigenous people at my school.”*
- Cultural Identity: participant talk of band identity, cultural lineage or personal identity. Example: *“...I've really been able to look at myself and say... you are allowed to call yourself Métis or allowed to call yourself Aboriginal because you feel it, because you know what you are.”*

**Supports:** something that the participant can identify in their school, family, community, etc. that provides support.

- Community Support: support provided by a community-level organization, or something else within the community.
- Cultural Support: Support provided by something related to culture (e.g., cultural practices).
- Family Support: Support provided by a family member (e.g., mom, dad, sibling, cousin, etc.).
- Peer Support: Support provided by a peer, whether at school or in the community.
- School – Individual Support: Support provided by an individual at the school-level (e.g., teacher, guidance counsellor, coach, etc.)
- School – Program Support: Support provided by a program at the school-level (e.g., Fourth R program, mentoring program, etc.)

**Good Quotes:** use this code to highlight any exemplary or interesting quotes.

**Personal Mentors:** use this code to indicate discussion of others the participant identifies as a personal mentor in his/her life

**Reviews of the Program:** use this code to indicate specific reviews or recommendations for the mentoring program.

**Recommendations for Future Programming:** use this code to note discussion of recommendations for future mentoring programs. Example: “...*this should be something that is going to go on for a long time...we need to get students involved...*”

(Adapted from Crooks et al., 2017)

## **Appendix F: Codebook Audit Trail**

### Initial Codebook (V1) and Codes: April 2017

- Adapted from Crooks et al., (2017) sample draft codebook distributed at April 11, 2017 at Qualitative Data/Dedoose Training

### Codebook (V2) and Codes: May 11, 2017

- Removed root code “Successes.” Seemed redundant, as otherwise reflected in in other codes
- Removed root code “Stories.” Code was not utilized during first phase of coding.
- Removed parent code “Help-Seeking Strategies” and “Characteristics of Support” from root code “Support.” Two parent codes were not utilized during first phase of coding.
- Changed parent code “Teacher Relationships” to “School Staff Relationships” under root code “Support.” This was done to incorporate relationships cited with school counsellors.

### Codebook (V3) and Codes: May 25, 2017

- In consultation with Deb, concern of too many parent codes.
- Removed parent codes “Extracurricular Relationships” and “Teacher Relationships” form root code “Relationships.” Two parent codes could be captured elsewhere.
- Removed root code “Self-Perception” as well as parent codes “Self-perception in the Present” and “Self-perception in the Future.” “Self-perception in the Present” was typically co-coded with “Personal Contributions” and “Self-perception in the Future” was typically co-coded with a parent code under “Aspirations”
- Removed root code “Sense of Belonging” because was typically co-coded with parent code “Cultural Togetherness” under “Culture”
- Removed parent codes “No support” and “Other Support” under root code “Support.” Codes were not utilized during two phases of coding.
- “Types of Support” was removed as a root code as it was not utilized during the phases of coding.
- Root code “Challenges” was removed, as all data was incorporated into other codes.
- Parent code “Cultural Support” under root code “Support” was eliminated, as the sole excerpt could be otherwise coded under “Cultural Togetherness”
- Creation of parent code “Cultural Identity” under “Culture” root code. Code created to capture participant talk of band identity, cultural lineage or personal identity.
- Addition of “current and reciprocal” in parent codes under “Relationships” to make category distinctly different from root code “Supports”
- The term “aspirations” in all descriptions under “Aspirations” root code was changed to “ambitions”

### Codebook (V4) and Codes: June 12, 2017

- Removed root code “Prompt”
- Separated “Reviews /Recommendations” root code into “Reviews of the Program” to reflect comments made about the Uniting Our Nations mentoring program, and “Recommendations for Future Programming” to reflect discussion of future mentoring programs.

- Inserted example quotes for each code.
- Addition of “teachings” to parent code “Cultural Practices/Teachings” under root code “Culture”
- Addition of grandparent codes: “Attendance,” “Cognitive,” “Modelling Behaviour,” “Participation in School Opportunities,” and “Academics” under root code “School Contributions.” This was done to better capture the diversity and detail of data within this root code.
- Addition of “Knowledge/Skill Acquisition,” “Self-Appreciation,” “Self-Efficacy,” and “No Contributions” under root code “Personal Contributions.” This was done to better capture the diversity and detail of data within this root code.
- Removal of “Community Relationships” from root code “Relationships.” Excerpts were coded elsewhere.
- Removed parent code “Relationship with Self” from root code “Relationships” as data accounted for within “Personal Contributions” parent code.

## Appendix G: Summary of Study Findings Distributed to Student Mentor Participants

# Benefits for Indigenous Youth Mentors

Insights from the Uniting Our Nations  
Peer Mentoring Program Mentors

May 2017

### Who:

- 11 youth mentor participants
- ages 16-18
  - 4 males and 7 females

### What:

Programs created to engage and empower Indigenous youth within the school system, like that of the Uniting Our Nations Peer Mentoring Program, can support personal growth, and provide connectedness to culture and school.

### When:

Spring 2017

### Where:

Two Thames Valley District School Board high schools.

### Why:

Much of the focus has been on benefits of mentor program participation for mentees, however, this study wished to learn of the benefits for mentors.

### How:

#### 1) Mentors Participated in Two Activities:

- An interview
- A sorting and rating activity

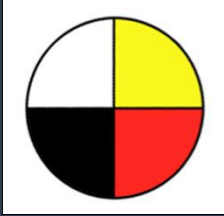
#### 2) Using the Mentor Voice:

- Participants were encouraged to speak openly about their experiences
- Interview statements were returned to the mentors to be sorted and rated by importance

I think my role as being a peer mentor benefited my life, helping me to be a good person, at home, within my community and at school and make better choices because it reflects on the type of mentor I am. So, becoming a mentor just helps to make me good life choices and wiser choices. (Youth mentor).



## Benefits of Peer Mentoring



### Making Cultural Connections

- Culture was discussed least frequently of all the interview themes but was identified as most important by youth in the sorting and rating activities.
- Youth enjoyed smudging, being with friends, talking about culture, and sharing a space together.
- Youth reported a strong sense of culture in their personal identities.

"I feel like I'm already pretty culturally connected...but through the peer mentoring I've been able to help share my experiences and my knowledge on the culture with others who don't get the opportunities that I do to participate in ceremonies or cultural events and traditional dancing and singing. So, it's really important to me that I'm able to teach that to the younger generations because if I don't then, you know, who will?" (Youth mentor).



### Self-Discovery

- Many youth spoke of their self-confidence and security in their ability to make decisions for their future.
- Youth reported comfort in their cultural identities because of the program.
- Some youth discussed their aspirations to continue their journey of self-discovery by teaching others about culture.

"I didn't have a whole lot of knowledge on anything whether it be healthy relationships in general or anything to do with my culture. I think that over the program, as well as last year's program, I've really been able to look at myself and say, "You know...you are allowed to call yourself Métis, or allowed to call yourself Aboriginal, because you feel it, because you know what you are." (Youth mentor).



### Improved Relationships

- Many mentors discussed their strong relationship with self.
- Many youth believed the program improved their connections with peers.
- Youth identified their connections to school, their families and their communities.

"[The program] gives me the opportunity to show my family that it's a good thing that I'm reaching out. Because I am Métis, a lot of my family...don't get connected with that Aboriginal side. So, it gives me the chance to explain things to them and to give them some of the knowledge that I've learned in the mentorship groups. As well, I can be a mentor for them if they want to reach out and get in touch with their Aboriginal roots." (Youth mentor).

## Curriculum Vitae

Melissa Coyne-Foresi, M.Ed. RSW

### EDUCATION

- 2016-present Western University, London, ON (2016-present)  
**Master of Arts (Field of Applied Psychology in Schools)**
- 2005-2007 University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON (2005-2007)  
**Master of Education (Educational Counselling)**
- 2001-2005 King's University College, London, ON (2001-2005)  
**Bachelor of Arts (4-year, Specialization in Psychology)**

### EXPERIENCE

- 2016-present Western University, London, ON (2016-present)  
 Centre for School Mental Health, Faculty of Education  
**Graduate Student Assistant**
- Assist with continued development and roll-out of updated Uniting Our Nations: A Peer Mentoring Program for Aboriginal Youth mentor manual and programming.
- 2012-present Thames Valley District School Board, London, ON  
 & 2007-2011 **School Support Counsellor**
- Provide supportive counselling to students and parents/guardians to address social, emotional, and behavioural barriers to learning.
  - Developed a mentoring program for primary- and intermediate-level students to foster school connectedness, as well conducted a research study on the program with the assistance of the TVDSB's Research and Assessment Department.
  - Developed and delivered school programs to address needs including three primary and junior social skills groups and an open grade eight girls group focused on conflict resolution.
  - Completed a collaborative series with First Nations Elder in efforts to inspire inclusion, leadership and unity in the school body.
  - Sample interventions include self-image, bullying, anger challenges, suicidality, social service referrals and social skills challenges.
  - Member of the multi-disciplinary Autism Spectrum Disorder Team (2015-2016) and Safe Schools Committee (2008-2016).

- 2016 Western University, London, ON (Summer 2016)  
Centre for School Mental Health, Faculty of Education  
**Research Assistant**
- Assisted in updating the Uniting Our Nations: A Peer Mentoring Program for Aboriginal Youth mentor manual.
  - Developed seven mentoring sessions to be used over a school semester, including session goals, discussion, and activities.
  - Also assisted in creating a participant workbook to accompany the manual.
- 2011 London Police Service, London, ON (2011)  
Family Consultant and Victim Services Unit  
**Family Consultant**
- Respond to police referrals, occurrence reports and calls from the public and other agencies for clinical consultations.
  - Attend calls for service to assist officers with traumatic occurrences.
  - Act as liaison between the community and police and maintain a working knowledge of community resources, including support for those with mental health issues.
  - Membership with the Critical Incident Debriefing Team.
- 1999-2009 Dance London, London, ON (1999-2009)  
**Dance Instructor**
- Taught multiple dance classes per week to students aged four to nineteen.
  - Used effective communication skills to ensure acceptable level of understanding while fostering a sense of self-esteem and confidence in all students.
  - Consulted with directors regularly to discuss the progress of my classes.
- 1999-2005 Home Care, London, ON (1999-2005)  
**Caretaker of Special Needs Child**
- Cared for eight-year-old child with autism and followed her therapeutic schedule as established by “The Option Institute.”
  - Worked with child’s “team” to plan and schedule her daily activities.
  - Communicated with child in a manner she could understand, and encouraged her response through play activities.

## PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- 2014-present Registered Social Worker, the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers

**SCHOLARSHIPS/AWARDS**

- 2017            Inclusive Education Award, \$750  
 2016            Western Continuing Admissions Scholarship, \$3700

**PUBLICATIONS***Refereed contributions*

**Coyne-Foresi, M.** (2015). Wiz Kidz: Fostering school connectedness through an in-school student mentoring program, *Professional School Counseling Journal*, 19(1), 68-79.

*Non-refereed contributions*

**Coyne-Foresi, M.** (2016). Research snapshot: Challenges in evaluating culturally-relevant programs for Indigenous youth. [Summary of the article Navigating between rigour and community-based research partnerships: Building the evaluation of the Uniting Our Nations health promotion program for FNMI youth, by Claire V. Crooks, Angela Snowshoe, Debbie Chiodo and Candace Brunette-Debassige.] Centre for School Mental Health, Western University. London, Ontario.

Lapp, A., Cywink, M., Crooks, C., **Coyne-Foresi, M.**, Kirkham, A., & Hughes, R. (2016). *Uniting Our Nations: A peer mentoring program for Aboriginal youth: Mentor's manual* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London, ON: Centre for School Mental Health, Western University.

Lapp, A., Cywink, M., Crooks, C., **Coyne-Foresi, M.**, Kirkham, A., & Hughes, R. (2016). *Uniting Our Nations: A peer mentoring program for Aboriginal youth: Mentor's workbook* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London, ON: Centre for School Mental Health, Western University.

**VOLUNTEER WORK**

- 2015-present    TVDSB Elementary School Council  
 2005-2007      London and District Distress Centre, London, ON  
 2003-2005      London Coalition Against Pesticides, London, ON  
 2003-2004      Canadian Red Cross, London, ON  
 2002              Salvation Army Correctional Services (Harmony House), London, ON