

**PROSPECTS FOR ABORIGINAL MENTORING:
A PRELIMINARY REVIEW**

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SUMMARY

Mentoring is a practice that can be traced to the Homer's *Odyssey* (800 B.C.E). Numerous organizations today, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters Society of Edmonton and Area (BBSB), design and develop mentoring programs. Members of Aboriginal communities have expressed a need for culturally matched mentors for Aboriginal children and youth. BBSB is interested in learning more about how these programs could be designed, structured, and supported by the Aboriginal community.

In this study we explore mainstream concepts of mentoring and Aboriginal perspectives, as revealed in literature as well as in interviews. Key elements for Aboriginal mentoring programs were determined through interview and focus group discussions about existing program successes and challenges. Participants provided insights about the prospects and problems that might be anticipated in developing program for Aboriginal communities. To be successful, new mentoring programs should be developed in collaboration with community members from the outset and should be built on existing strengths and programs within the community. Successful Aboriginal mentoring programs will include close relationships with the mentee's family, respect of traditional values and culture, community sense of ownership, training for coordinators and mentors, adequate resources for sustainability, and recognition and respect for protocol. Formation of a community advisory group for guidance and support is highly recommended.

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INTRODUCTION

In late fall of 2002, Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Edmonton (BBSB), with financial support from Alberta's Ministry of Children's Services and Alberta's Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, approached the Community-University Partnership and the Alberta ACADRE Network at the University of Alberta to conduct a preliminary investigation that would provide insights into how to develop mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth. BBSB wanted suggestions about how these programs could be designed, structured, and supported so that they would be meaningful to the communities in which these programs are developed.

Adults who provide friendship, guidance, and support for children and youth outside of their own immediate families often are called *mentors*. The process of mentoring is viewed widely as having a positive and valuable impact on how children and youth develop (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Sipe, 1996). Programs designed to create and nurture these relationships have grown rapidly in recent years (Sipe & Roder, 1998). Despite this general growth, mentoring programs designed specifically for Aboriginal children and youth are relatively rare. In response to a perceived need for Aboriginal mentoring programs, agencies are beginning to explore methods for developing such programs in ways that will meet the diverse needs of children, youth, and communities. To facilitate this process and in an effort to identify some of the critical issues that must be recognized and addressed, we review the concepts and procedures underlying traditional mentoring programs and compared them with Aboriginal perspectives on mentoring. We then describe a number of issues and insights generated in interviews and focus groups with a wide variety of people who have relevant

knowledge and experience. Finally, we provide several recommendations to guide the process of developing effective, adaptive mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth.

SECTION I: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To explore the literature related to mentoring, we searched the University of Alberta library system and the Internet. Literature included periodicals, reports (grey literature), and unpublished theses. There was a distinct lack of literature on Aboriginal mentoring (Smith-Mohammed, 1998). The most useful key words were *leadership, education, mentorship, learning, role model, and leader*. There appeared to be a dichotomy in the literature between more formal or Eurocentric perceptions of mentoring and Aboriginal approaches.

Historic Contributions/Influences

There is no single definition of mentoring in the literature. Within Eurocentric cultures the definitions are subjective (Kartje, 1996) and have changed over time. To understand the concept of mentorship, it is important to first study the many sources from which mentorship has evolved. Doing so offers a glimpse into the motivations, purposes, structures and types of mentoring relationships that exist, all of which contribute to the diversity of current definitions.

The word *mentor* originally comes from the oft-cited Greek myth, *The Odyssey*, by Homer (800 B.C.E). While Odysseus was away fighting the Trojan War, he appointed Mentor to raise his son and future king, Telemachus. In this situation, Mentor had to take on many roles (father, teacher, friend, advisor, supporter) to compensate for Odysseus' absence. Although some of these roles were authoritarian, others were more egalitarian. Thus Mentor had to maintain a careful balance between authoritarian and egalitarian roles while focusing on the primary objective, to prepare Telemachus to become King as per Odysseus' vision.

In more recent times, the concept of mentorship has been central to youth organizations such as the Boy Scouts. These groups emphasize skill and personal development under the supervision and support of adults. Mentoring activities take place in the outdoors to “create modern American character in children (especially boys), perceived by many at the turn of the twentieth century to be imperiled by an effeminate, post-frontier urbanism” (Deloria, 1998, p. 96). Interestingly, however, many Boy Scout values and skills are borrowed from Aboriginal culture. From woodcraft to the study of and respect for nature, the teachings’ “essence reside[s] in Indianness” (Deloria, 1998, p. 96). Thus a mix of cultural influences, including the adapted Aboriginal elements, has been passed down from generation to generation through the scouting mentoring relationship.

Within the last few decades, mentoring literature and programming have become specialized within three settings—academic, corporate, and social (personal)—each with its own goals and strategies (Kartje, 1996). Within corporate mentorship, a senior member protects, promotes, and advises a junior member toward the ultimate goal of career advancement (Zey, 1984). Academic mentorship is often between a professor and a graduate student, in which the student learns the skills and practices necessary for academic achievement (Lyons et al., 1990). Similar to an apprenticeship, there is a shared focus on learning “insider information” (Zey, 1984) from experts about how to gain professional success through skills specific to the institution. Consequently, a greater focus is placed on the outcomes of the knowledge transfer rather than the relationship itself.

Of the three types of mentorship settings, however, the most broad in its scope is social or personal mentoring, a practice that has entered the mainstream as an alternative to government-run social programs for addressing the social problems of children and youth (Bein, 1999).

Usually personal mentoring occurs within organizations that initiate and support personal relationships between at-risk youth and volunteers from the community. The objectives of personal mentorship are very broad, emphasizing the social development of children and youth though not necessarily excluding the academic and employment objectives that are common in corporate and academic mentorship. It is recognized that by helping the youth to solve their social problems through friendship and guidance, other forms of success are likely to follow.

An Evolving Definition

Over time, different interpretations of mentoring have surfaced that reflect societal, national, and cultural perspectives. In the recent past, Western definitions of mentorship have been quite narrow and were usually restricted to dyadic relationships between the mentor and protégé (Hurley, 1988). Shaunessy et al. (1999) note that this relationship usually involves a distinct power difference since the mentor is regarded as more experienced and knowledgeable, and the protégé is the beneficiary of that knowledge. In this hierarchical expression of mentorship, typified within corporate and academic mentoring, the relationship is a means of transferring skills, information, and knowledge from a professional to a rookie, or a teacher to a student. Thus, the benefits of mentor-protégé relationships are highly unidirectional and primarily directed towards the protégé.

Mentoring is defined individualistically (Freedman, 1993), and focused more around those directly involved (i.e., the mentor and the protégé) rather than their families or the surrounding community. Self-sufficiency is a central value of individualism and, in the context of mentoring as a solution to social problems, the act of mentoring is regarded as support for individuals so that they can advance themselves (Bein, 1999). Individual choice is also emphasized, so that youths are free to choose their own paths as long as they fit within the

boundaries of societal norms. The steady growth of mentoring organizations has been criticized however, for the transfer of responsibility for social problems from government-funded programs (social housing, professional social workers, etc.) to community volunteers (Bein, 1999).

The integration of culturally and nationally specific values and ideologies (e.g., individualism) within mentoring approaches has enabled the term to become a vehicle to promote patriotism and the well being of society. From Odysseus' use of Mentor in creating a strong ruler to the Boy Scouts' incorporation of American values, there is a sense that to mentor is to fulfill a national duty that strengthens society. By mentoring the younger generation, cherished values and cultural icons are passed down to build respect and conformity to societal ideals. This is evidenced through the decreased levels of behavioral deviance (e.g., missing school, committing crimes) as a primary outcome of successful mentoring programs (Tierney & Grossman, 2000).

Very recently, however, contemporary Western mentoring literature and programs have shifted to a broader concept of mentorship. Freedman (1993) defines mentoring as the process whereby an older person eases a younger one's transition, a definition that does not allude to any specific, predetermined outcome or direction. Further, the mentor's role has shifted from being authoritarian, such as a parent, to increasingly egalitarian, such as an older sibling or a friend. This trend towards greater respect for the mentee's goals is evidenced in The Mentoring Center's description of the mentor's role as providing "support, guidance, learning and concrete help *as needed* (italics added)" (Jacks, 2000, p.1). Lastly, volunteerism also makes up a central component of the contemporary definition of a mentor. This change in emphasis places responsibility within the community from which the volunteers are drawn and has thus caused

many mentoring organizations to nurture closer community links and greater involvement (Littkey & Allen, 1999).

Contemporary Components of Social Mentorship Programs

As the concept of mentoring has evolved, the characteristics of formalized mentoring programs have become increasingly recognized and articulated. Understanding the components common to successful mentoring programs—recruitment of mentors, screening and matching of mentors and mentees, and the relationship between them—is important for designing new programs and for recognizing critical issues that must be addressed.

Recruitment

Recruiting mentors has always been one of the most fundamental challenges of mentoring programs since their very core is based upon community volunteerism. Due to the large time investment and specific qualities required, the pool of potential mentors is usually quite small. The lack of mentors combined with the competition between community organizations for volunteers (Jucovy, 2001), has led to a shortage of mentors and an excess of mentees on waiting lists (Sipe, 1999). This situation is further exaggerated in minority communities where, due to a higher prevalence of social problems such as poverty, there is an even smaller pool of potential mentors from which to draw.

A variety of strategies are used to recruit volunteers. A few of these include advertising; making links with businesses, schools, and organizations; and word of mouth. The latter tends to be most effective (Sipe, 1999). Whatever the recruitment strategy, however, certain key elements should be considered (Jucovy, 2001). Recruitment strategies must increase community awareness about programs, outline selection criteria, and set recruiting deadlines. Recruitment

techniques will be successful in attracting mentors if they are tailored towards the most likely groups (e.g., college students and the elderly).

Screening

In the selection process it is important to carefully screen potential mentor candidates. Mentees, who are children or youth, may be vulnerable as they are usually facing social problems and may also be from minorities. In a study of Big Sisters Big Brothers programs, for example, more than half of mentees were from racial minorities and 80% were from impoverished families (Tierney & Grossman, 2000). Thus many mentees are at a potential power disadvantage as they enter a trusting relationship with an adult, and potentially at risk for abuse or neglect. Sipe (1996) found that poorly chosen mentors can harm self-esteem in children and decrease their trust in adults, an especially dangerous effect if they already lack positive adult role models.

As well as a stringent screening process for mentors, there is also a screening process for mentees, which takes into consideration the characteristics of the target group of at-risk youth, as well as the mentoring shortage and corresponding oversupply of mentees on waiting lists (Leroy., da Costa, & Ellis, 2002). It is also important to try to protect mentors from youths who may have violent histories and pose danger to mentors. Thus screening is a two-sided process.

Choosing positive role models and appropriate mentees, however, is not an objective process and is dependent on the criteria used. Such selection criteria are determined by the mentoring organization and therefore reflect both the organizations' and society's definitions of the qualities a mentor or mentee should possess. For the mentor, these criteria include commitment, availability, trustworthiness, maturity, communication skills, respect, financial stability and civility, assessed through interviews, references, and financial and criminal record

checks (Sipe, 1996). Mentees most frequently chosen are those with no other natural mentors (Freedman, 1993), and who may be at-risk in some way (poverty, substance abuse, behavior problems, etc.). Again, these criteria for a “good” mentor and for a mentee who “needs” to be mentored can be subjective.

Matching

As a complementary component to mentor/mentee selection, matching is recognized as an important factor for creating lasting relationships that will produce desirable results. The approaches and methods for matching, however, vary greatly, and there is no conclusive evidence favoring any one approach over another (Sipe, 1999). The most common matching criteria are gender and race, due to the belief that mentees will benefit most from mentors who share common life experiences. Same-race matches in minorities, for example, allow mentors to learn culturally specific history, traditions and learning styles (Smith-Mohammed, 1998) that may not be taught in mainstream schools, and serve as minority role models for success (Jucovy, 2002). Finally, matches usually reflect the preferences of both the mentee and the parents or guardian, as mutual respect and anticipated benefits contribute to a successful relationship.

Recent evidence supports the benefits (or, at least, the lack of negative effects) of matching people with different characteristics or experience. Such matching typically occurs when there is a lack of mentors with similar characteristics (Sipe, 1999). Cross-cultural mentoring has been very effective as a “cultural bridge” for new immigrants, as well as developing the ability for mentees to function and succeed in both their own and mainstream cultures (Smith-Mohammed, 1998). Other examples of dissimilar matching come from in-school mentoring (Eggers, 1995) where, to accommodate high class sizes and a diversity of

learning styles, both high and low achieving students mentored one another. This type of pairing also produced unique benefits for both the mentor and mentee.

The Mentoring Relationship

It has been found, however, that even more important to a successful pairing and relationship than race, gender, or experience, are the mentor's qualities and behaviors within the mentoring relationship. Although there are expectations of the mentee as well, the greatest responsibility is on the mentor.

Of these expectations, the most important may be respect for the mentee and long-term commitment. Effective mentors are those who do not try to change youth or "fix" their problems, but who support and help youth to achieve their own goals (Sipe, 1999). This creates a more egalitarian relationship in which there is mutual learning and benefit (Freedman, 1993). Also, since time is essential to trust building (Sipe, 1999), longer relationships allow the youth to open up, are more meaningful, and increase the number of positive effects that result from the relationship (Sipe, 1996). Time, however, is not simply an absolute factor, but is also dependent on the consistency of the mentor's involvement and commitment to the relationship (DuBois & Nelville, 1997). Thus positive relationships are caring, respectful, and stable over time.

Aboriginal Perspectives on Mentoring

Prior to contact, First Nations people had tribal customary practices for providing mentor-like guidance for children and youth. "Mentorship is one thing eluding all of us that are leaders [now] in our communities. We used to mentor because this is how we taught our young people in our community" (Makokis, 2001). The whole tribe (or community) contributed to raising the children as everyone had their role to play in teaching the young: mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, elders, community members and leaders. "Children were regarded as a

gift from the Creator and members of the community shared responsibility for their upbringing” (Hall, 1996, p.141). According to Makokis (2001), family relationships have been central to social organization among Aboriginal people. Indigenous tribes, in the past and the present, hold the extended family in high regard as they assist in mentoring the children.

Several extended families combine to form a band. Several bands combine to form a tribe or nation; several tribes or nations combine to form confederacies. The circle of kinship can be made up of one circle or a number of concentric circles. These kinship circles can be interconnected by other circles such as religious and social communities. This approach to Aboriginal organization can be viewed as a ‘spider web’ of relations. (Little Bear, 2000, p. 79)

Little Bear’s analogy reflects the importance of kinship ties with not only the nuclear and extended families, but also the community. It is through this complexity of interweaving and interconnecting social circles that Indigenous people usually find themselves relating to each other. Therefore, the mentor’s knowledge of the local social context can be helpful in establishing a strong connection with the mentee.

Historically, the Indigenous family structure was disrupted by the imposition of residential schooling by the colonial administration. The first assimilation policy was established “according to Canada’s Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonal . . . with the assistance of church and state, wandering hunters would take up a settled life, agriculture, useful trades and, of course, the Christian religion” (Milloy, 1999, p. 6).

Education was believed to be the most critical element in this assimilation strategy (Jaenen, 1995; Milloy, 1999). Young children were taken from their homes to residential schools to learn a new lifestyle. They were not permitted to speak their own languages although

they did not understand the dominant language. As well as disconnection from families, cultural patterns and language, there were a number of health problems associated with the residential schools. Miller (1996) described many schools as rundown with insufficient supplies.

Overcrowded dormitories, windows sealed to conserve heat, poor diet, inadequate clothing and outbreaks of tuberculosis and other infectious diseases are well documented (e.g., Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

As a mentor, it would be important to understand the impact that the legacy of the residential school experience has on Indigenous people today, such as loss of language, pride, spirit, culture, family, innocence, and sense of self (Assembly of First Nations, 1994; Ross, 1996; Steinhauer, 2002a). Many Indigenous families are still experiencing the intergenerational effects of residential schools, effects that have hindered the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual life of community members (Lafrance, 2003). There has been much research that indicates residential schooling has many negative impacts, such as lack of role models and training for child rearing (Bull, 1991).

In contrast to the style of education imposed through residential schools, Aboriginal views on education are more holistic and inclusive of the immediate family, the extended family, and the community (Steinhauer, 2002a). Hampton (2000) found that Indian culture has different ways of communicating than mainstream society. According to Steinhauer (2002b), Indigenous realities (such as culture, values, and customs) represent a worldview that is different from that of non-Aboriginal people. Mentoring programs should take into consideration the different worldviews between mentors and mentees, and should establish as close a match as possible.

According to Steinhauer (2002a), prior to colonial times, much of a child's general knowledge was gained by watching and listening. The indigenous instruction that Steinhauer

refers to can be traced to an approach that Miller (1996) described as the three Ls: looking, listening and learning. According to Barman et al. (1995), learning emphasizes beliefs and values such as respect for all things that are living, individual responsibility, self-reliance, and proper conduct. The way families shaped behaviors was through the use of positive examples (Barman et al., 1995; Hall, 1996; and Miller, 1996). Through the use of oral tradition, stories, games, and role modeling were often used to set examples for the young (Hall, 1996, Miller, 1996). This learning process directly relates to mentoring as the mentoring relationship involves listening and watching. Mentors and mentees can learn from stories, examples, role modeling and actions that are based on their relationship with each other.

The way in which effective mentoring can occur is through an understanding of a positive Indigenous learning environment. Aboriginal children are taught from an early age to respect elders and not to question authority. This poses a challenge for mentoring particularly in a cross-cultural situation where a non-Aboriginal mentor may inadvertently be instilling values and beliefs from another worldview. Some non-Aboriginal cultures encourage children's questioning of adult perspectives. According to Steinhauer (2002a), pursuing an education is not only for the individual, but for the immediate family, the extended family and the community – which creates a full circle back to the individual. Likewise, mentoring is not only for the individual, it is for families, communities, mentors and children. A mentoring relationship can also strengthen strong kinship, cultural values and beliefs.

According to Henderson (2000), the Indigenous worldview is holistic rather than individualistic. From this perspective, everyone (family, community, and leaders) can contribute to a mentoring relationship in many ways, including cultural teachings, stories, role modeling, and sporting activities. Hampton (2000) gave the example of education as a means for serving

people and not for individual advancement or status, as this notion only instills competition. A mentor can contribute an important service by building and establishing relationships with children and youth. A mentor also can be a newfound friend and a caregiver.

Given that some experts suggest that Native students learn easier in small groups (Little Bear, 2000), group mentoring may be an effective strategy for Indigenous children and youth. Work within a small group may be facilitated with methods and symbols appropriate for Aboriginal culture. For example, the medicine wheel represents the holistic perspective of a balanced life that encompasses the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. These fundamental principles of life are also reflected in the use of sharing circles. Using such a cultural symbol in mentoring can build respect and trust between the mentor and the mentees, as in a circle everyone is equal (Chisan, 2001).

Incorporating knowledge of Indigenous history and culture will likely be very important for strengthening the relationship between mentor and mentee. In particular, mentoring programs for Aboriginal communities must be based on a thorough understanding of the traditional centrality of the family in community organization, the importance of the community for raising children and youth, and the lessons learned from imposed residential schooling. Moreover, mentoring programs need to be developed with sensitivity to the fact that people in Aboriginal communities are likely to differ significantly from non-Aboriginal communities in their perspectives on optimal ways of teaching and learning and, more generally, in the nature of the educational experience.

Summary of Approaches

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal approaches emphasize the need for children and youth to have strong role models when they are growing up, often provided by family members.

Both approaches acknowledge that the roles of immediate family members in child development can be replicated and/or enhanced by extended family or non-kin community members. This recognition is demonstrated, for example, in the terms used to describe people who take the role of mentors. The Cree word for *aunt* on the mother's side of the family, *nikawiys*, is translated as "little mother," thus defining a non-immediate family member in terms of her mother-like role toward her niece or nephew. In a non-Aboriginal context, the use of kin terms such as "big brother," "big sister," and "uncles at large" as references to non-kin mentors indicates the kin-like role they play in mentees' lives. Thus there is a shared recognition of the importance and flexibility of role modeling, and the importance of role modeling to personal development.

There are also, however, differences between these cultural approaches. While non-Aboriginal mentoring is more focused on the mentor/mentee pair and often involves a one-on-one structure, Aboriginal learning and child rearing more commonly take place in a group setting. The latter typically is a more informal atmosphere where there is less distinction between who is teaching and who is being taught. Further, in Aboriginal communities close bonds among both immediate and extended family, as well as non-kin members, are valued and important for raising children and youth. All mentoring-like activities, then, are closely connected to the surrounding community or at least linked to the Aboriginal culture.

Despite these differences, there have also been converging trends between Aboriginal communities and mentoring organizations. In Aboriginal communities there is a move toward program-based social programs for youth, similar to formalized mentoring programs. This trend has arisen largely to compensate for destruction of the informal social and cultural systems that traditionally guided youth (Hassin & Young, 1999), and the need to re-build them through formal programs. Mentoring organizations, on the other hand, have also incorporated some of

the same strategies traditionally used in Aboriginal culture. Mentoring programs are now being offered in a diversity of settings (in-school, e-mentoring) and structures (one-on-one, group mentoring, etc.). Further, mentoring programs are becoming more connected to communities through partnerships with schools and other social programs. Though differences still exist, this type of convergence highlights the realization of the benefits that each approach has to offer for youth.

SECTION II: INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

Method

Because of the paucity of literature on mentoring programs designed explicitly for Aboriginal children and youth, interviews were conducted with 15 individuals who, given their diverse experiences, were able to provide insights about the prospects and problems that might be anticipated.

After receiving an ethics approval from the University of Alberta, a total of 10 individual interviews and one focus group interview (with five participants) were conducted during the month of March, 2003. Recruitment criteria for participants included extensive experience in developing, implementing, administering, or studying programs for children or youth, especially for Aboriginal children and youth. Interviews were either conducted over the telephone or in person according to availability and convenience for the participant. Consent was requested prior to the individual interviews and focus group interview. A standard set of questions [see Appendix] was used to guide the interview process. All interview sessions were recorded, coded and subsequently analyzed thematically.

Most participants were from urban centres such as Edmonton, Calgary, and Winnipeg, as well as from First Nation reserves (Saddle Lake, Hobbema) and Métis Settlements. Our sample

included people from several different types of youth programs and positions within those programs. All participants except one were Aboriginal. Most of the Aboriginal participants had experience as program developers and all were experienced leaders and role models. The sample was selected from a wide network of people including Alberta ACADRE Network and BBSB, and from suggestions from interviewees.

Findings

The primary purpose of talking with the participants was to explore Aboriginal, community-based mentoring practices and programs that could inform the development of a mentoring program for Aboriginal children and youth. We found that *mentoring* is a word not normally used in Aboriginal communities. Focus group participants described this difference.

“My mentors, I mean I didn’t even know they were my mentors.”

“We all teach, we all guide. We may not define it as [mentoring] ...but in essence we are.”

This basic variance between Indigenous and mainstream perceptions of mentoring sets the context for the data analysis. There are two major themes that emerge from the data that provide direction for the development of mentoring programs for Indigenous children and youth:

- The fundamental nature of community and culture, and
- The key elements of successful mentoring programs.

The Fundamental Nature of Community and Culture

Inclusion of *family* in mentoring was mentioned in a number of ways throughout the focus groups and interviews. Some participants felt that family was an essential partner in the mentoring process. Thus, there needs to be a relationship between the mentor (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal), the mentee, and the mentee’s family to ensure success.

“[Mentoring] is an effective treatment program for families, not just youth.”

“We need more family-oriented services. Right now there are only band aid solutions.”

Others suggested that the mentoring process could be a means of enhancing traditional values and healthy living patterns. *“We need to design and develop a life skills program for families.”* Residential schools have changed the family dynamic: *“You have to realize the homes that [youth] come from and the lifestyle, especially the urban lifestyle.”* Some participants suggested that youth need to be taught about their parents’ residential school experiences and the impact this has had on traditional parenting skills.

Individuals in the focus group emphasized how programs that bring family and community together create an interface for “community identity” that Aboriginal youth need. One person explained how at-risk youth normally do not have any attachment to family or community, so there is no compulsion to respect and value themselves or others. *“[Youth] need to positively identify with community. They need to feel like they have a connection that builds a sense of belonging.”* This sense of community, rural or urban, creates an atmosphere where families can learn, and where adults can learn to become mentors and role models themselves. Overall, respondents strongly emphasized the need for community involvement from the outset of any program. *“It should be community driven and if it is a community need it would work better.”*

Community involvement encompasses two key sub-themes in the data: *protocol/politics* and *ownership*. Following proper protocol within an Indigenous community conveys respect and trust, and it involves approaching the appropriate community leaders (e.g. chief, council, elders) at the outset.

“Meet with chief(s) and council(s) and let them know your intentions.”

“It is better if the community members want to do it.”

“Once you [approach elders, council and community] properly, they can help out the program.”

“Often times it’s not so much what you do but how you attempt to do it [that determines] how much success you’ll have.”

Some participants suggested that the most harmful influence on youth programs is interagency politics. External organizations must be aware that protocols and politics vary from community to community. *“Each city is unique and each community is unique.”* Regardless of whether programs are initiated by community or external organizations, protocol is important, and community buy-in is essential. One person suggested an Aboriginal community advisory group for each mentorship program.

The ideal situation identified by all participants was when people in a community initiated the program themselves. A number of respondents mentioned that youth should play a key role in the planning process. If youth have a sense of ownership of the program they are more likely to respect and feel connected to the program. *“The youth need to own and develop their own program.”* *“The program should be developed by the youth themselves to create pride.”* However, one participant mentioned that adults are reluctant to relinquish leadership power to youth. Most participants were insistent that role models and mentors must be Aboriginal people; that although Aboriginal children learn from a number of leadership models, mentorship should be from Aboriginal mentors, who can confirm traditional values. *“Aboriginal adults must be the mentors for the Aboriginal kids; that’s the bottom line.”* Having community members as mentors who are reinforcing *traditional cultural values* with youth and children

creates a level of ownership and responsibility essential to program success. In the absence of Aboriginal mentors, there is some support for cross-cultural mentoring.

Key Elements of Successful Mentoring Programs

There was much discussion about the lack of appropriate Indigenous *role models* in the communities. Several factors were invoked to explain this perceived problem, including the facts that many Aboriginal families are single-parent families and some adults have not healed from residential school experiences, drug and alcohol abuse, or criminal activities. Another participant also pointed out that *“most people are too busy raising their own families and their own extended families to be doing volunteer work.”* Two community leaders expressed concern about the need for a screening process that adequately protects the children from adults who may want to take advantage of them.

“I’m very cautious when I start thinking about adults working with youth. Children are very vulnerable and people think they can take liberties with our children that they can’t take with other children.”

“In allowing those who have records this may allow them to relate to those youth struggling in life.”

Our data indicate that a different screening program for Aboriginal mentors may be useful. Recruitment and screening need to be culturally appropriate in order to expand the number of Aboriginal mentors; criteria for inclusion of people who have recovered from addictions or criminal activities may have relevant experiences to share.

Several participants mentioned the need for training role models within the community, and the fact that once they are trained there are few opportunities for them to use their skills. People reported feeling undervalued as mentor. Our participants mentioned that there are few

role models in city institutions. For example, one person noted that he knew of four Aboriginal police officers in Edmonton, and several Aboriginal teachers, but that teachers were rarely in the city schools. Nevertheless, he felt that teachers are often good mentors, and that a mentorship program should start in the school, within the educational program, at the level of Grade 1 or 2. Another solution to the lack of available mentors, suggested by two respondents, was peer or group mentoring. *“Sometime it’s better to have a few mentors with a larger group of kids.”*

The issue of *resources* was raised in response to various interview and focus group questions. One of the main conclusions from the data was the need to build on existing programs and strengths, thus avoiding duplication of services.

“I get frustrated when they bring in new programs when they can’t sustain the programs they have right now.”

“You need a substantial budget for programs and staff, and one that is stable over time.”

A successful mentoring program would be one that is connected to other programs in the community with similar objectives whether they are mentoring specific or not. *“They have tried almost every program in the world on Aboriginal people. They last a little while and then there is no sustainability to them.”* Some of the organizations mentioned as providing something akin to mentoring programs include: Boys and Girls Club, Bosco Homes, HIV/AIDS programs, safe homes, summer day camps, summer student programs, drop-in programs, cultural programs such as round dances, Young Warriors, conferences and workshops, Aboriginal Head Start program, Alberta future leaders program, Ben Calf Robe School, and recreation programs such as dance, computer, karate, and archery.

Participants mentioned that many successful programs for children and youth involved recreation as the vehicle for the mentoring process. Others suggested that a recreation program

could be modified to become a mentoring program. Many participants felt that children and youth need to have fun in a positive environment where they feel comfortable. *“Programs must be fun (can include food, music, etc.) so that youth want to be there.”* One rural community example was given where a school-based program provided young people with a place to get together and adult supervision to model positive relationships. *“You have a group of young people and a peer dynamic here but you also have adults teaching them how to interact with each other. It’s an informal mentoring relationship. It’s not a one on one.”*

Respondents saw *volunteers* as a scarce but essential resource, and some suggested that youth were a resource as peer mentors.

“Creating positive peer groups is most powerful for kids.”

“Screening to ensure positive mentors that work well with youth and who have been through similar circumstances to youth-mentors can be youth themselves.”

“Attracting volunteers is very difficult since mentoring is draining of time and emotion-incentives are needed (not just monetary ones)”.

Many Indigenous people cannot access existing resources. Several people raised the issue of the ability to participate for members of poor families with many children. One gave the example of the need for *transportation* to be provided for activities, as a parent cannot leave the other children to drive one child, and the entire family may not want to come to wait for the program of only one child. Further, the need for financial support and buy-in from local communities and provincial governments was also mentioned. *“All the Aboriginal teachings say that programs for Aboriginal people have to be developed with the Aboriginal community.”*

A few raised the issue of *financial support* and *sustainability* for programs. One said, *“I get frustrated when they bring in new programs, when they can’t sustain the ones they have right*

now.” There was general agreement on the need for commitment and ownership. One participant spoke strongly of the need for government to view existing Aboriginal organizations as *resources*, and to consult them for research such as this, as well as program design and implementation. *“Why didn’t they come to an Aboriginal agency; we’ve been doing this stuff in the community for the last 18 years.”*

All participants agreed that mentoring is a good idea, although there was disagreement on whether the programs are “needed” more than other programs might be. One participant defined mentoring as a process of teaching youth to make healthy choices, become self-responsible, and transfer skills to increase self-esteem. Most agreed that there is little formal mentoring in the communities but there is considerable service provision.

Summary

Participants generated a number of specific insights and recommendations that are pertinent to developing mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth. Because of the variability in needs and characteristics across communities, programs will have to be developed in ways that are highly sensitive to immediate contexts. The issues and suggestions below may not apply equally to all contexts, but they can be used to probe the critical variables that need to be explored before developing a plan for a new program.

Five key suggestions emerged from the interview data for planning effective Aboriginal mentoring programs:

- Obtain mentors who are Aboriginal;
- Ensure that family are involved in the entire process;
- Ensure that transportation for mentors as well as children and youth,

- Nurture communication among parents, mentors, coordinators, community leadership, and youth; and
- Build on and sustain existing programs.

Participants suggested that a successful mentorship program will:

- Build skills for kids (leadership and self esteem);
- Incorporate Aboriginal culture and traditional values;
- Create positive peer groups with adult intervention;
- Be open to group mentorship as well as individual mentorship;
- Ensure that family is involved;
- Integrate ceremonies with families as appropriate;
- Include skill and lifestyle training (e.g., anger management) with follow-up support and mentoring; and
- Make programs fun by including food and music when possible.

Following are considerations that should be taken into account when preparing to implement a mentoring program:

- The community must be involved as an integral part of the development process in identifying goals and objectives for the program;
- Children and youth should be involved in conceptualization of the program to have a sense of ownership;
- Appropriate protocol should be followed;
- Personnel from external agencies should be sensitive to their status as coming from an outside organization;

- The process of developing a program will require considerable time for nurturing community involvement and ownership and for developing trust, and so the plan for program development must include realistic, rather than rushed, timelines.

Following are suggestions that should be considered when administering a mentorship program:

- The program should not conflict with other important community events (e.g. pow wow season, bingo);
- The program should complement, not duplicate, the mandates of other organizations;
- Coordinators need to understand the community context;
- Coordinators need the support of the community;
- Coordinators need to be properly funded to ensure stability of operation;
- Creative measures are needed to communicate with participants, given the lack of telephones;
- Different cultural perceptions of time may be important;
- Mentorship programs in different places may not look the same;
- Criteria for selection and recruitment of mentors must be clear;
- A training process and monitoring evaluation process should be in place; and
- A process must be in place for building and strengthening the mentorship team.

SECTION III: COMPARISON OF FINDINGS

The concept of mentoring has changed considerably over time and is likely to continue to evolve as mentoring practices expand to different contexts. As evident from our review of the literature and from participants in our interviews, the term *mentoring* is uncommon in Aboriginal

communities, but the core concept—adults providing friendship, guidance, and support for children and youth outside of their own immediate families—is culturally ingrained.

Developing mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth will present challenges, but it also is likely to require solutions that will contribute to the continued evolution of mentoring concepts and practices.

Several elements of the literature we reviewed on Aboriginal perspectives were confirmed, and often expanded, by the participants in our interviews. For example, the centrality of the family and the community was raised in both cases, but our participants also cited the pressing need for family-oriented services and for helping children and youth to gain a sense of community identity. Our participants also identified a number of concerns not mentioned in the literature, such as the need to follow local community protocol in initiating projects, the importance of community ownership, the role of community members to serve as mentors who encourage traditional cultural values, and the concern for the commitment and resources necessary for ensuring that mentoring programs be sustainable.

Successful mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth are likely to require a careful merging of the components that underlie success in non-Aboriginal programs with the perspectives and needs of individual Aboriginal communities. These perspectives and needs are likely to vary from community to community, and so it would be foolhardy to suggest that one approach could be developed to fit all contexts. Programs developed for First Nations reservations may not fit the needs of people on Métis settlements or in urban settings, although our data were not sufficient to distinguish the likely differences. We can, however, recommend several principles and guidelines that should facilitate the initial planning and development of successful mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth.

1. Mentoring should not be seen as a stand-alone, narrowly targeted program but rather as an activity that is entirely supportive of community values and goals and that is integrated fully with other activities related to community building, education, and healing.
2. Mentoring should be embedded in existing programs.
3. A community advisory group should be established at the outset of any mentoring program to inform and guide the development process.

SECTION IV: COMMENTS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Individual and focus group interviews were conducted to gain insights that could supplement and perhaps confirm conclusions based on the sparse published literature related to mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth. The responses of participants were very helpful in addressing the questions that served to motivate this study, thus supporting the strategy of using these methods of collecting data. Participants were enthused about their involvement, and many offered their services as advisors for the development of future mentorship programs. Although the research strategy was successful in many ways, time and resource constraints affected the depth of the data collection and, most probably, findings and conclusions. As an elder observed, the sense of time differed for the research team, the funders, and the community participants. Specifically, the urgency with which the research was undertaken did not allow for the development of procedures and relationships that would have facilitated more detailed data collection and analysis, as well as opportunities for more extensive participant involvement in the research. This lesson must be underscored in the research and development of mentoring programs for Aboriginal children and youth.

SECTION V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The benefits offered by mentorship would be value added to communities. To be successful, however, mentoring programs should be developed with community members and linked with similar existing community programs. Coordinators must be appropriately trained and supported, mentee families should be incorporated, and programs should have a flexible structure that includes group mentoring and cultural events. Mentorship programs will likely experience challenges in recruitment due to a lack of available mentors in the community, though existing programs specializing in leadership training may provide a valuable pool. There is also a need to adjust the screening process so as not to filter out potential mentors who may have had a troubled past but who have important experience to contribute. Incorporating these elements will help to make mentoring programs meaningful and address some of the challenges that undoubtedly will arise.

Our participants did not discuss possible differences between urban and rural settings for mentoring programs. The literature review supports group mentoring and Aboriginal mentors for Aboriginal children. The biggest challenge facing mentoring organizations in Aboriginal communities may be the recruitment and screening of Aboriginal mentors. These tasks may be accomplished best through existing programs where mentoring skills are provided to the leadership and as an incentive to membership in the organization. As people become familiar with the role of a mentor it is important to provide opportunities for self and external evaluation to ensure that appropriate boundaries are maintained. Evaluation processes should be appropriate to the community and team being evaluated, and the goals developed at the outset by the community. The process of establishing trust with the community takes time and patience for both partners as this serves as a new learning experience for everyone. Finally, program

planners must ensure adequate and realistic time for the community to develop trust and commitment.

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APPENDIX

Questions for Interviews and Focus Groups		
Question	Possible Probes	Information Sought
1. What are your connections to Aboriginal children and youth?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was/is it with an organized program? • (If mentoring is mentioned, seek a definition.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience in mentoring programs, unofficial and official. • Details so that we can, in a general fashion, describe our sample for readers.
2. Can you give me some examples of programs (in your community) mainly for the purpose of adults providing friendship, help, and guidance to Aboriginal children and youth?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were you involved directly with the program? If so, What was your role? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding info from #1. • Seeking information for existing programs that serve as models for development. • Perceptions of familiar mentoring-type programs.
3. What do think makes (or would make) such programs successful or not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you commenting on an existing program, or on one that you imagine could work? • Would you build on existing programs or starting fresh? • What would the purpose of such a program be? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elements and characteristics of a successful program from the perspective of the interviewee.
4. Do you think there is a need for such a program(s) for Aboriginal children and youth in your community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why or why not? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To assess need from the perspective of interviewees.
5. Suppose that a community like yours (or an Aboriginal community you know about) wanted to start a program where adults would be connected with children or youth mainly for the purpose of providing friendship, help, and guidance. How would you get a program like this started for Aboriginal youth in your community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where should the initiative come from? • What kinds of people should be involved? • What steps would have to be taken? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insights about initiating a program .
6. What resources would (do) you need to keep a program like this going?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding? Leadership? Space? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recipe for success

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Do you think it would be helpful to get advice from a group that has experience in establishing programs like this elsewhere? In Aboriginal communities? In non-Aboriginal communities? Why?” 	
7. What challenges might you encounter?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cautions, maybe about protocols that must be followed.
8. What other ideas or suggestion do you have for programs that guide Aboriginal children and youth in your community?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insights that may be useful but that were not expressed completely in response to our earlier questions.