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## A case study of culturally relevant school-based programming for First Nations youth: improved relationships, confidence and leadership, and school success

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Schools are expected to promote social and emotional learning skills among youth; however, there is a lack of culturally-relevant programming available. The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programs for Aboriginal youth include strengths-based programs designed to promote healthy relationships and cultural connectedness, and improve school success during the transition from elementary to secondary school. A mixed methods evaluation of these programs was undertaken utilizing 35 elementary and secondary student interviews, survey data from 45 secondary students, and 7 educator, and principal interviews. Four themes emerged: (1) programming was perceived to contribute to student success; (2) participants experienced improved relationships, and an increased sense of belonging; (3) participants gained confidence and leadership skills; and (4) the provision of culturally relevant experiences and role models was key to program success. The results underscore the importance of developing and implementing culturally relevant programs for Aboriginal youth, who as a group have been historically marginalized in the education system. Furthermore, promoting cultural connectedness in schools facilitates the development of bicultural competence, and reduces the pressure many of these youth experience to choose between success at school and their Aboriginal identity.

**Keywords:** First Nations youth; culturally relevant programming; strengths-based; bicultural competence; cultural identity

In its current form, Canada's approach to Aboriginal<sup>6</sup> education does not meet the needs of Aboriginal learners (Ontario Ministry of Education, Aboriginal Education Office, 2007; Quinn, 2011; Sisco, 2010), who face myriad risk factors in relation to socioeconomic and health inequities compared with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. For example, graduates of the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB, n.d.) (which includes London Ontario and surrounding area) are consistently among the most competitive entrants to college and university programs. Yet, many of its Aboriginal students struggle to graduate high school.

More than 150 years of aggressive colonization and assimilation policies by the Canadian federal government have resulted in disproportionately high rates of social problems in many Aboriginal communities (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Residential schools played a particularly damaging role in this history, as sites where First Nations children experienced pervasive

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cultural, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Milloy, 1999). Within this context, it is not surprising that there is widespread mistrust of the education system among individuals in many Aboriginal communities. Resistance and rejection of the school system has become commonplace among Aboriginal youth (Silver, Mallett, Greene, & Simard, 2002), who often view educational success in a Western context as oppressive of their Aboriginal identity. However, Aboriginal scholars like Turner (2006) and Wilson (2008) argue that Western education and Aboriginality are not polarizing; in fact, educational success can be used to strengthen and reassert Aboriginal identity as well as Indigenize educational systems.

Bicultural competence provides an alternative to the perceived dichotomy of Aboriginal identity versus Western education. Bicultural competence allows Aboriginal youth to alternate between cultural and Western identities in response to contextual cues (e.g., school, family, life in community) (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). This type of competence has been linked with numerous protective factors for Aboriginal adolescents, including enhanced adjustment, social competencies, health, personal mastery, self-esteem, and social support (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Moran, Fleming, Somervell, & Manson, 1999). It has also been identified as a significant protective factor against substance abuse among American Indian and Alaskan Native youth (Hawkins, Cummins, & Marlatt, 2004). Because Western education focuses almost solely on Western competencies, a complementary focus on promoting cultural connectedness and identity is required to facilitate the development of bicultural competence in the school setting. Cultural connectedness and identity in turn, has been shown to be associated with a number of well-being indicators among First Nations youth in a school setting (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015). Beyond promoting cultural identity, educators can encourage bicultural competence by showing points of convergence between cultural and Western educational identities.

In recognition that Aboriginal youth tend to perform better academically and experience reduced high-risk behaviors in culturally relevant educational programs that build bicultural competence (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Longboat, 2012; Mussell, Cardiff, & White, 2004; Pridmore, 2004), the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) Centre for Prevention Science expanded its range of evidence-based Fourth R programs (Wolfe et al., 2009) to include programming specifically for Aboriginal youth. These programs were designed to be culturally relevant for Aboriginal learners (experiential; spiritually oriented; communal; strength-based; rooted in culture; integrate Aboriginal with Western knowledge; and account for social, economic, and political realities) (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, 2009). Collectively, these programs are known as Fourth R: Uniting our Nations. Over the past decade, program feedback obtained through surveys and focus groups with students, educators, and administrators has indicated a high level of satisfaction among stakeholders; however, the programs have not been formally evaluated.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the programs' impact in promoting healthy relationships and cultural connectedness among participants, and to collect data that could inform new program developments and alter existing programs. First, this article provides an overview of the development and implementation of Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Program in the TVDSB. Second, it describes the research methodology employed, the results of the study, and a discussion of how they relate to previous research, as well as limitations of the research. Third, this article offers some concluding remarks in relation to the implications of the research undertaken.

## **The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations<sup>7</sup>**

In 2004, the Fourth R program team began working with the TVDSB and its community partners – the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Munsee-Delaware First Nation – to develop and evaluate school-based, culturally-relevant, relationship-focused programming with and for First Nations<sup>8</sup> students. Over the past decade, the Fourth R team has developed numerous initiatives, including: (1) Elementary Mentoring Program, (2) Grade 8 Transition Conferences, (3) Peer Mentoring for Secondary Students, (4) Cultural Leadership Course, (5) Cultural Leadership Camp, and (6) First Nations, Métis, Inuit (FNMI) Student Advisory Committee (see descriptions below). All programs focus on healthy relationship development, mentoring, and cultural connectedness.

### ***Elementary mentoring program***

The elementary mentoring program is an 18-week, school-based program for grade 7 and 8 students facilitated by two First Nations young adults who mentor groups of students for one hour per week. The program is based on the Medicine Wheel<sup>9</sup> life cycles. Beginning in the Fall (West/Spiritual quadrant), sessions address student interests, the Creation Story, and creating positive attitudes and atmospheres. In the Winter (North/Physical quadrant), sessions address bullying, healthy eating, and First Nations' representations in media. In the Spring (East/Emotional quadrant), sessions address sharing and listening, goal setting, and positive decision-making skills. In the Summer (South/Mental quadrant), sessions address communication skills, peer pressure, personal strengths, and handling peer conflicts.

### ***Grade 8 transition conferences***

The Fourth R team facilitates two full day Transition Conferences annually for First Nations students in grade 8. These conferences are designed to provide students with the information and resources to prepare them for a successful transition from grade 8 into grade 9. Guest speakers, including Elders, share cultural knowledge and provide guidance on navigating identity issues. First Nations counselors and teachers explain the courses as well as school and community resources that are available to support students, including extra-curricular activities.

### ***Peer mentoring program for secondary students***

The Peer Mentoring Program supports the development of healthy and positive relationships between junior (grade 9) and senior (grades 10 through 12) secondary students, who participate as mentees and mentors, respectively. This program facilitates student mentees and mentors meeting during lunchtime on a weekly basis over the course of the school year to engage in a range of activities together. An adult mentor from the First Nations community also facilitates a teaching circle with the mentoring participants several times per semester. This community mentor helps to provide support to the school mentors, incorporates cultural teachings into the program, and serves as a role model.

### ***Cultural leadership course***

The First Nations Cultural Leadership Course incorporates the strengths of peer mentoring into the classroom setting, which allows youth to earn an academic credit for their

participation. The course combines older and younger secondary students who are working on one of two credits (leadership or study skills) into the same classroom. The course provides senior students with an opportunity to assume the roles of student leaders and volunteers for initiatives outside their schools, such as the Grade 8 Transition Conferences.

### ***Cultural leadership camp***

The Cultural Leadership Camp is a three-day, intensive, outdoor, experiential program designed to support First Nations secondary school students in developing leadership and healthy relationship skills through culturally significant, personally challenging, and fun activities. Elders, community leaders, and academics are invited to share traditional and contemporary teachings on hunting, land conservation, team building, creative arts, and healthy living strategies.

### ***FNMI student advisory committee***

The FNMI Student Advisory Committee is composed of approximately 20 secondary students (grades 10–12) who are selected among applicants annually to represent FNMI students' needs and interests within the TVDSB. The group meets monthly to develop and implement a project with the support of CAMH First Nation youth leaders.

## **Methods**

### ***Design***

The research team employed a case study design to evaluate Fourth R programming in the TVDSB. This study included surveys and individual interviews with youth participants of Fourth R programs, as well as educators and principals at schools involved in the programming. The Research Ethics Board at the CAMH approved all protocols, as did the research office at the school board, and the educational board representing the First Nations communities.

### ***Participants***

In total, 82 individuals participated in this study, including elementary and secondary students as well as educators and administrators from 15 schools. Students' involvement with programming ranged in terms of duration and intensity. The process whereby students became involved in the programming differed from Elementary to Secondary school. In the three elementary schools, all grade 8 youth were invited to participate in the mentoring. In the 12 secondary schools, there was a combination of youth encouraged by educators to attend, and self-selecting youth who might have heard about the program from siblings and peers. The research team interviewed 28 elementary students who participated in elementary mentoring and the transition conferences, as part of an ongoing longitudinal program evaluation. The team also conducted surveys with 47 secondary school students (25 male, 20 female, 2 not specified) involved with some combination of mentoring, culture camp, and/or the cultural leadership course during the 2011-2012 school year. Student age ranged from 14 to 19 years (mean age = 16.10 years). Of the secondary students who completed the survey, seven (4 male, 3 female) participated in

individual semi-structured interviews. Finally, the research team conducted interviews with two administrators (1 female and 1 male) and five Aboriginal educators (all female).

**Measures**

The survey included general close-ended items reflecting overall experiences as well as program-specific items pertaining to mentoring, culture camp, and the cultural leadership course. There was also one open-ended question asking participants to identify their most memorable experience in the program. Survey respondents were asked to rate their agreement with statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Specific survey statements are in Tables 1 and 2 (along with frequency of endorsement).

The interview protocols included specific questions and prompts to ensure that relevant areas were addressed in the interview (e.g., general experiences at school, access to informal supports, program experiences), but the interviewers followed the direction set

Table 1. Self-reported impact of programming on student success, relationships, and belonging (*n* = 47).

<i>Student success items</i>	<i>% Agree or strongly agree</i>
I feel supported at school through these programs	85
What I learned from these programs helps me deal with challenges at school	90
These programs have made me a more successful student	85
The skills I learned in these programs have been useful for communicating with teachers	83
<i>Relationships and belonging items</i>	
I feel a sense of belonging while participating in these programs	90
These programs have helped me feel involved at school	85
I have met new friends through these programs	90
I look forward to participating in these programs	92
The skills I learned in these programs have been useful for communicating with friends	95
I would recommend these programs to a friend	98

Table 2. Percent of students who agreed or strongly agreed with program specific items.

<i>Items asked only of Peer Mentoring participants (n = 26)</i>	<i>% Agree or strongly agree</i>
In peer mentoring, I learned new things about friendships and relationships	100
In peer mentoring, I learned where to find support if I need help for myself or a friend	100
In a potentially difficult situation, I was able to delay, negotiate, or refuse my way out of it	100
In life outside school, I have used peer mentoring skills to build healthy relationships	89
<i>Items asked only of Culture Camp participants (n = 22)</i>	
At culture camp I developed my skills as a leader	93
At culture camp I learned about being part of a team	100
At culture camp I felt more connected to my culture	100
Through camp I felt a sense of belonging with my peers	93

by interviewees. The interview protocol began with very open-ended questions and interviewers expanded this line of inquiry with prompts to elicit both positive and negative feedback. Interviewers also asked students more specific questions in relation to their involvement with the program. Interviewers asked students about their perceptions of the programs' effects on their cultural knowledge and school experiences (see Appendix for sample interview protocol).

### ***Procedure***

The research team recruited all eligible elementary student participants engaged in a larger longitudinal evaluation, and secondary students involved with the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programs during the 2011–2012 school year. A research assistant attended the mentoring program at three secondary schools to describe the research and recruit interview participants. Although many students indicated interest in participating in interviews, only seven secondary students returned their parent consent forms in time to participate.

The research and programming team identified seven educators and administrators who had a strong understanding of the programs and/or had worked closely with youth involved in the programs. All of the identified potential interviewees participated in the study, including principals, teachers, and First Nations counselors. Interviewers provided student participants with a \$10 gift card and adult participants with a \$25 gift card (the adult interviews were much longer in duration). Two members of the research team who had not been directly involved in the programming conducted interviews in order to increase confidentiality and foster an interviewing environment conducive to participant reflection and feedback.

### ***Data analysis***

The research team summarized quantitative survey data with descriptive statistics using SPSS and conducted thematic content analysis of qualitative data, identifying themes and patterns by employing the thematic network technique as an analytic tool for identifying, reporting, and analyzing patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic networks are web-like illustrations that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text (Attride-Stirling, 2012). The research team derived and categorized basic themes into organizing themes through a constant comparative method of identifying, coding, and constructing multiple thematic networks of key words and word repetitions.

### **Results**

This section discusses the four emergent organizing themes from the qualitative data analysis and the related quantitative data from the surveys for each theme. The basic themes grouped by organizing themes are provided in Table 3. All quotations are taken from interviews, except for the two noted to be survey responses.

#### ***Programming is perceived to contribute to student success***

Student participants, and their educators and administrators reported that student success had increased as a result of program involvement. Approximately 85% of respondents indicated that they had become more successful at school as a result of participating in the Fourth R (see Table 1). During interviews, students identified a number of skills and



Table 3. Basic themes grouped into the four organizing themes.

Organizing themes	Basic themes
Student success	Feeling more supported Increased student self-advocacy Improved mood More student involvement Student behavior improved Reductions in suspensions and bullying Higher graduation rates
Sense of belonging	Positive healthy relationships established Meeting new friends Improved relationships Improved school activity involvement Increased comfort at school and with others Improved communication skill
Leadership skills and confidence	Speaking to groups Voicing opinions Opportunity to be a leader and mentor Pride Maturity Positive self-concept Increased involvement
Cultural Relevance	Positive FNMI role models Connecting to culture Sharing cultural knowledge with family/friends Experiential learning opportunities Gaining cultural knowledge

attributes promoted in the programs that led to this increased school success. For example, one student experienced increased student success through learning self-advocacy in asking for help in the classroom (Interview, male grade 8 student, 2012). Another student reported that the positive emotional impact of the program improved her grades, ‘It [the program] really lifted my spirits. I was feeling kind of down but they always make me feel happy so that kinda’ ties into academics too. When you’re happier your marks go up’ (Interview, female grade 8 student, 2012). Educators and administrators also reported an improvement in grades and behavior for students involved in Fourth R programming, and in some cases provided very concrete examples:

Certainly many of the kids in the Fourth R program were in trouble quite a bit last year but not this year. One of those students went from being way below grade level in grade 8 math and he is now right at grade level and he just maxed out the program he is on and he is an 85% math student now ... and I know that was part of that intervention and prevention. (Interview, female educator, 2012)

Other interviewees noted reductions in suspensions and bullying. For example, one elementary educator noted that teasing and bullying on the bus ride to schools was reduced the year the Fourth R programming was implemented (Interview, female educator, 2012) and a principal noted student behavior and academic performance had significantly improved:

Our students seem to be academically more successful than they were last year without the program. I see less students in the office, I think that’s probably the biggest issue that we noticed. There are probably 4 or 5 students in that grade 8 classroom who were seen significantly in the office and I don’t see them this year. In fact they make comments, “so do



you miss me?" in fun, which is also something they would not have done before ... I don't think I have suspended any of the students in the program this year ... whereas last year, I had suspended them many times. (Interview, female principal, 2012)

Another principal noted that they had the highest graduation numbers for First Nations students in years, and attributed that success to the programming (Interview, female principal, 2012).

***Participants experienced improved relationships and an increased sense of belonging***

Secondary students' survey results revealed that they experienced a sense of belonging with the programs, met new friends, and developed new skills (see Table 1). There was a high endorsement of the general statements of benefits, with between 83% and 98% of students agreeing that they benefitted in those ways. The results also showed that those involved in peer mentoring experienced specific benefits related to developing healthy relationship skills and communication styles (Table 2). For example, one secondary student explained the program helped her to avoid unhealthy relationships (Interview, female grade 11 student, 2012), while another reported developing improved relationships (Interview, female grade 11 student, 2012). Similarly, several of the elementary students interviewed also reported that the programming supported them in developing improved relationships, 'It [the program] showed us how to speak to people nicely and not rudely and standing up for yourself by not being mean to the person while you are standing up for yourself' (Interview, female grade 8 student, 2012). Educators also reported that the programming supported students in developing positive relationships. One educator identified the programs as an important stepping stone to increasing school involvement and joining other activities:

There are students that you saw in grade 9 and it's their first thing that they ever got involved in and then by the time they are in grade 10 they are starting to go out to other clubs and then by grade 11 and 12 they are leaders within the school and not just within the First Nations groups. For example, this year one of our former mentors is the co-president of the school. (Interview, female educator, 2012)

Participants identified the communication skills they gained from programming as helpful to building friendships and experiencing increased comfort in school. Examples provided in student interviews included overcoming shyness and becoming more outgoing, improved public speaking and debate skills, increased understanding and respecting the opinions of others, and improved conversation skills.

Student interview participants also reported that having a role model eased their transition to secondary school:

... it [the program] gives you that role model in your mentor, someone who can kind of guide you through your first year here at [school] so you can make a good transition with your mentor from grade 8 to 9 because your mentor has a lot knowledge about stuff like classes, and work load and you also have someone to talk to if they are feeling like they are behind in school, they can talk to their mentor ... The Fourth R helped me build relationships with my mentor and even the other mentors even if they weren't mine. And I kind of knew a lot of people after that and kind of got to know their friends and make new friends myself. (Interview, male grade 12 student, 2012)

Educators viewed the programs' provision of role models from the same cultural background as important:

... where you can see kids from your community in leadership positions and that's very powerful. You see amazing leadership, you see some articulate students at the secondary level

going off to college and university with high aspirations and those kids have had those mentors through grade 8 up through high school and you can see that it builds confidence and capacity. (Interview, female educator, 2012)

For students coming to an urban high school from a rural First Nation, this opportunity to develop relationships with a wider circle of youth was particularly important for both easing the transition to high school and developing positive relationships with students and educators. One participant reported that it helped her to meet and develop positive relationships with students and teachers beyond her community members (Interview, female grade 11 student, 2012) and another student reported that it helped her to make friends in her last year of high school:

Before my early years coming here I really didn't know anybody and I didn't talk to anybody so I was just with the kids I came to school with off the reserve and then my last year I joined this program and I talk to more people and more people are saying hi to me in the halls and stuff. (Interview, female grade 12 student, 2012)

### *Participants gain confidence and leadership skills*

Participants also reported that the programs helped students to gain confidence and develop leadership skills. Students reported becoming more confident in voicing their opinions and getting involved in other school activities (Interview, male grade 12 student, 2012). For example, one student participant stated, 'I started Fourth R before I did any other things in the school and it gave me more confidence to go out and meet new people and do other activities at school' (Interview, female grade 12 student, 2012), and another said, 'I feel that I get more involved with things, where I wouldn't before. I talk a lot more than I used to' (Interview, male grade 12 student, 2012). The adult interviewees identified similar gains in overall confidence and demeanor among youth, 'There definitely has been a maturity in the way that they are approaching school and school life and their behavior here and their ownership here. I see them walking taller in the halls I see a difference in them' (Interview, male principal, 2012).

In connection with increased confidence, the results suggested that student participants also gained leadership skills. For some students, the program provided their first opportunity to experience a leadership role. One student reported his positive experience as a leader speaking at the Grade 8 Transition conference:

... I learned how to stand up in front of a crowd and speak and it makes me feel appreciated in this program. It makes me feel like I am actually doing something for the grade 8's and 9's too. (Interview, male grade 11 student, 2012)

Participants also reported feeling proud and valued in the leadership roles the Fourth R provided. For example, one student participant stated, 'I feel kind of proud because you know I feel like I have a voice and they are listening to me and like they are taking my advice and stuff so you just have to hope they grab it' (Interview, female grade 12 student, 2012). Another student explained how being a student mentor provided him with a more positive self-concept and influenced his behavior:

It makes me feel good because I never really thought of myself as a mentor but I guess they must see something in me and it just feels good to be there and mentor the younger ones that are just starting and show them how to be a role model, something for them to look up to. (Interview, male grade 12 student, 2012)

Adult participants noted the increase in confidence, and in one case, connected it to the impact of the role modeling provided by mentors:

You see amazing leadership, you see some articulate students at the secondary level going off to college and university with high aspirations and those kids have had those mentors through grade 8 up through high school and you can see that it builds confidence and capacity. (Interview, female educator, 2012)

### *Culturally relevant experiences and role models are key to programming success*

Survey results indicated that 81% of respondents participating in programs felt more connected to their culture at school. The role of culture emerged in many of the interviews as well. One student explained that the cultural component of programming engaged her with the Fourth R (Interview, female grade 12 student, 2012). Another student explained how the cultural knowledge she gained motivated her to make positive changes:

They told us about how there are four things: spiritual, mental, physical and emotional. As I started thinking about that it kinda told me to do things differently. So I was thinking if I can get my grades up that can help me mentally and if I can exercise that will help me physically and spiritually and everything I can try to get it to a higher level. (Interview, female grade 8 student, 2012)

The culture camp participants' responses most emphasized the importance of cultural connectedness. One student participant noted that the camp challenged her, reconnected her with her culture, and led to friendship with other First Nations youth:

Being open to challenging myself physically and being able to connect with my culture through smudging and the drum creation made me want to know more about our ancestry. I do not want to lose some valuable traditions for the future because I did not bother to learn them and the FNMI<sup>10</sup> group that spiraled from this camp is proof that I'm not the only city native who wants the same. (Survey, female grade 12 student, 2012)

Several students noted that being able to share cultural teachings and traditions with family members was a particularly positive experience. For example, one student who learned how to make a dreamcatcher taught her parents later that night (Interview, female grade 8 student, 2012). Another student was able to learn and then teach his mother and grandparents how to make a drum:

My most memorable experience was at the culture camp when we made the drums. Not only did I learn to make a drum, but I learned what all was involved during the process. I was also able to get the chance to awaken my drum and even learned to play a song. This is important to me because without that chance I would never have learned or even did it. It gave me a chance to learn about my culture which means a lot to me. I am able to teach my mom and grandparents who don't know very much about the culture either. (Survey, male grade 12 student, 2012)

The interconnected assets developed in these programs are situated both at the individual level and at the systems level. That is, the programs build individual youth assets, and also positively influence the school system.

### *Individual identity*

At the individual level, the results of the evaluation showed that the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programs help to promote a strong sense of identity among First Nations youth. The Fourth R provides opportunities to embrace culture *and* be successful as students, thereby promoting bicultural competency:

Mentors are showing other kids that you can succeed and still be Aboriginal. That's the key; it's showing kids they don't have to lose who they are in order to be successful. We are not asking you to assimilate or give up everything to success. We know that you can keep connected to your culture and success. (Interview, female educator, 2012)

One student participant explained that the program helped him to reconnect with his culture and identity (Interview, male grade 12 student, 2012) and another participant stated that the program helped her to teach others:

I grew up on [name of community] reserve so when I was younger I attended long houses and ceremonies and we would always have a tradition feast when someone passed and weddings in the long house and I kind of already knew a lot but it was good to teach everyone else what I know so that was good too. (Interview, female grade 12 student, 2012)

The concept of bicultural competence is an important element of the Fourth R because it explains how culturally relevant programming can complement and enhance academic success. Some educators worry that culturally relevant programming will distract students from their academic pursuits. Conversely, 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. Both students and educators mentioned that the Fourth R's culturally relevant programming helps youth to connect with their cultural identity, and improve academic success:

I have seen students become more confident. I have seen a change in respect. I am thinking of one young man in particular who came to school and did what he needed to do but as the year has gone on he has taken on more responsibility for his learning and he has grown grades in achievement in several major subject areas. He is here every day . . . and will come down and show me the work that he has done. He is excited about going to high school and has set some goals in so far as getting to the end of this year and then beyond which he would not have done before the Fourth R. Just real growth in who he is as a person and just in a conversation walking down the hall one day he had said to me "now I see myself as a student" and I thought that was amazing. (Interview, female principal, 2012)

#### *Change in systems level*

Beyond changes at the individual level, it is important to consider systems level changes. As noted by an Aboriginal educator, promoting culture within the school setting is particularly important in view of Canada's history:

The graduation rate is very, very low . . . dating back to the residential school era, our grandparents were forced into school and forced into a way of living and teaching and there is a timidness there. We need to break free from that era and acknowledge that these Aboriginal youth are important to us and we need to foster their identities and empower them and by doing that we need them to come together as a collective group of people and bring that back home and say this is what I did at school today and I understand the circle. By having a program that is built to teach them pride and power is something we need to build on to increase their graduation rates. (Interview, female educator, 2012)

School environment plays a significant role in First Nations students' success, especially teachers' attitudes, cultural sensitivity, and inclusiveness (Bell, 2004). First Nations youth tend to experience more success when they encounter a safe and welcoming climate for themselves and their families that is respectful of First Nations cultures. The results show that the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations programs have changed the school environment, including the valuing and validation of First Nations cultural identity within it:

Fourth R gives them a sense of belonging. I think without them having something that they themselves can relate to in school, it doesn't have the same kind of impact or meaning for them . . . when we are looking at a number of students that are very shy, if they don't feel a connection through their culture, they are just getting dropped off and picked up, they are not really engaged with what is going on in the building. Having that cultural piece where they feel welcome and they feel wanted and they feel like they can contribute that is a huge part for many of our students. They are able to share and talk about things because they feel proud for who they are. (Interview, male principal, 2012)

This administrator's comment supports previous research in the field about the positive effect of welcoming school environments on youth (Habib, 2012).

## Discussion

The results of this study were consistent with the informal feedback and satisfaction questionnaires collected over the past decade, and highlighted the positive effects of Fourth R programming on relationships, confidence, and student success globally. The inclusion of Aboriginal educator voices introduced an added perspective. The importance of promoting cultural identity in the programming to foster cultural connectedness, protective factors (increased social competencies, self-esteem, personal mastery, and social support), and academic success among First Nations students emerged as a major theme, consistent with previous research (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; LaFromboise et al., 2006; Longboat, 2012; Moran et al., 1999; Mussell et al., 2004; Pridemore, 2004).

## Limitations

There are some limitations of this study worth noting. First, although the stakeholder perceptions of improved student success are important, these perceptions need to be validated with longitudinal data using more objective measures, such as credit accumulation and graduation rates. Second, there were two sources of sample bias with respect to the secondary student interviews. Secondary students who volunteered to participate in interviews could view the program more favorably than those who did not. Moreover, a much larger number of youth indicated that they would like to participate in interviews, but did not return signed parental consent forms within the timeframe, undermining the representativeness of the interview sample. Third, the evaluators were involved in the development and implementation of programs, which creates another potential source of bias. Finally, although participants were queried to provide both likes and dislikes of the programs, and asked for areas for improvement, they might have felt a demand to provide positive feedback. Furthermore, there is possibly a cultural element in youth being hesitant to directly criticize a program to an adult, as this communication would run counter to cultural teachings of humility and respect.

Currently, the longitudinal impact of the programming on individual participants is unknown. However, the research team is following a cohort of grade 7 and 8 youth over a period of three years to evaluate the impact of the programs during the transition to secondary school. In the short-term, the results of this study demonstrate that culturally relevant, strengths-based school programming for First Nations youth are perceived to provide a positive transformational experience for many participants. Stakeholders indicated that the programs helped to build bicultural competency and a number of associated positive assets among First Nations youth, by providing them with the opportunity to develop a strong sense of cultural identity in a way that also encouraged academic success.

The results of this study show that culturally relevant programming, such as the Fourth R, can enhance educational outcomes and reduce risk factors for First Nations students. Specifically, this evaluation shows that the programming was perceived to: (1) enhance student success; (2) improve student relationships, and increase student sense of belonging; (3) increase student confidence and leadership skills; and (4) promote success through culturally relevant approaches. At the individual participant level, the results showed that the Fourth R programs help promote a strong sense of identity among First Nations youth, which increases cultural connectedness, consistent with bicultural

education. At the systems level, the results showed that the Fourth R programming created a more welcoming and inclusive environment for First Nations students. Moving forward, helping a greater number of schools develop and implement these programs will ultimately improve the responsiveness of the education system for First Nations and other Aboriginal youth.

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### Notes

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6. The term Aboriginal is defined in the Canadian constitution to include the first peoples of Canada; namely, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.
7. Although this full name distinguishes the culturally relevant programming from the more generic Fourth R programs, the shorter form is used throughout this article for brevity. In addition, interviewees tended to refer to the program by the shorter name (i.e., Fourth R).
8. We have used the term Aboriginal when referring to policies and research that use that designation and we acknowledge that this terminology is generalized and rooted in a colonial discourse. For the remainder of the paper, we talk more specifically and accurately about our work with First Nations youth that is grounded in the local landscape in which we work. At times we use the term FNMI to align with a particular policy or program mandate of the Ministry or school board. When quoting interviewees we have accurately reflected their language choice in this regard.
9. Those unfamiliar with the Medicine Wheel teachings and who wish to understand the implications for education are referred to Bell (2014).
10. The acronym FNMI is used by some individuals to denote the same groups as the term Aboriginal (i.e., FNMI). In this case, we use the term Aboriginal when referring to literature that uses that terminology. We use First Nations in reference to the students within the programming and the communities to which they belong.

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## Appendix. Interview sections and sample questions for elementary students

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### Clarifying language preferences

As I mentioned, this interview is part of a project looking at the experiences of Aboriginal youth, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. We know that some people use the term Aboriginal, others use terms such as Native, and others prefer their specific Nation. How do you refer to your cultural background? (Whatever term they provide gets used in the interview).

### School experiences

How is school going this year? (*Prompt: Is it better or worse than last year? In what ways?*)

(Grade 8) How are you feeling about starting high school next year? (*Prompt for feelings as well as specific concerns/hopes*)

### Access to informal supports

When you are having trouble at school with classes or homework, what strategies do you use to improve things? (*Prompt: are there people or supports at school or in your community that can help you?*)

If you are having trouble at school with friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend, what would you do? (*Prompt for people they turn to for supports, coping strategies*).

Are there ways that being (Aboriginal/Native/XX) helps you deal with problems at school? (*Prompts: are there things in your culture you turn to? Are there people in your community you turn to?*)

Is there anyone specific at school that you can talk to about everyday school stuff as well as any problems you are having?

(If yes, clarify if it is an adult or peer). Is there anyone you consider a mentor? (*If unsure about what 'mentor means', provide: someone who provides guidance, friendship, support, and direction for youth*)

(If yes) What is it about this person that makes them a valuable support for you? (*Prompts: How do they help you, what do you look for in them*).

### Program experiences

Now I want to ask you about your experiences with activities and programs. What programs are you involved in at school? (*Prompts: sports, clubs, volunteer work, committees*)

(If youth are in programs) What do you like about these activities? What do you get out of them? (*Prompt for perceived skills, future benefits, relationships, etc.*)

### Elementary Mentoring program experiences

I want to ask you specifically about the group mentoring you do. What do you think about that program? (*Prompt: what do you like? Dislike?*)

Do you look forward to the mentoring sessions? (*Prompt why or why not?*)

Has the mentoring program helped you at school in any way? (*Prompt for academic and non-academic examples*)

Has the mentoring program changed the relationships among you and your peers in the program in any way?

Is your relationship with the group mentors different from your relationship with your teacher?

(If yes) In what ways?

Have you learned anything in the mentoring program? Any new skills for dealing with people?

Anything about leadership?

Have you learned anything new about your culture in the mentoring program? (*Prompt for examples*)

Have you shared anything you learned in a mentoring session with a friend or family member?

(*Prompt for examples, including how something was shared, what was shared*)

In your opinion what would make the mentoring program better?

What other activities or supports would make school better for you and other (Aboriginal/Native/XX) youth?

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Note: interview questions for secondary students were similar with minor differences.