NINE PRINCIPLES OF INDIGENOUS MENTORING

Indigenous-framed Mentoring in an Era of Reconciliation

Indigenous framed mentoring has substantial epistemological differences from western models; primarily in its goal to bring Indigenous youth, their families, and communities together in a healing framework that emphasizes a return to culture, identity, ceremonies, and language. This framework can also include systems navigation to achieve success in education and employment, physical fitness, and wellness and can include one-one mentoring, school mentoring, community-based group mentoring or a hybrid model. A systematic review of Indigenous youth mentoring programs by Sanchez (2023) identified five factors that tended to universally present in any version of successful Indigenous mentorship programs. They are:

1. **Establishing cultural relevancy**
   - Mentoring is focused on Indigenous identity
   - Use of Indigenous role models at all possible
   - Addressing barriers such as poverty, trauma before during and after the program
2. **Facilitating environment (s): Mentoring is built from:**
   - Indigenous cultures/ ceremonies and multiple & regional ways of knowing
   - Whole person & wellness focused vs siloed, and deficit based
   - Strength based & teaches about regional language at the core
3. **Building relationships:**
   - Mentoring is family healing: Include family in the program
   - Mentoring is community healing: Include community – particularly Elders in the program

4. **Community engagements:** Specifically supporting a variety of programming models that recognize regional, or tribal, community Nation differences and pertinent legislation. There will be important distinctions between Bill C92 First Nations/Métis Nation governments, and urban communities

5. **The importance of Indigenous youth leadership as mentors in Indigenous youth mentorship programming.** Mentoring is voice, and ensures that the program is youth/peer driven.

The building of lifelong knowledge through relationships or "mentoring" was employed in Indigenous communities prior to colonization as a natural form of immersion into Indigenous epistemologies or Issksiniip. Indigenous youth were both "mentees" and "mentors" as they assumed their natural role in this teaching process, and while this approach is being re-established as an act of Resurgence; little attention has been paid to documenting what elements make this relational approach transformational.

From a western perspective mentorship has been delivered as a programmed/structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together (typically through social agencies) with caring individuals who offer guidance, support, and encouragement. While this definition aligns with Indigenous understanding, there are significant differences that must be acknowledged in order to better ensure successful programming in Indigenous mentorship. Relationality, or Natural Law, can be defined as:

Worldviews: This is where the stories of creation and Natural laws are born. Every Indigenous nation has their own distinct worldview, the way in which they spiritually and physically situate themselves in the world relative to all other beings; that is, their relationships. The act of 'Making Relatives' is reflected within the concept of siim'ohksin (Blackfoot) or wahkotowin (Cree) and refers to the fact that all things in creation are related. Relationship is understood through the cultural principles of Discipline, Responsibility, Respect, and Accountability. When we talk about using a Siim'ohksin Wahkotowin approach, we are talking about using an oral approach to making relatives. Siim'ohksin or Wahkotowin are the closest approximations for the western idea of 'Making Relatives' and underscores a complex ideology and ceremony of building relationships.

The Nine Principles

Nine (9) Principles demonstrated to be a critical framework for agencies considering developing Indigenous mentoring programs. While they all may not be necessary, some constellation or interplay of one or more should be considered, and culturally interpreted in practice according to the local Natural laws or epistemologies of each region, Nation, or tribal affiliation. Examples of specific Indigenous mentoring programs can be found in the Appendices, along with an expansive overview of the factors that inform the 9 Principles.

1. **Mentoring is Family Healing: Include family in the program**

   Indigenous youth come with families—whether they be nuclear, extended, adoptive, fostered or community. Indigenous youth, family and communities have all suffered at the hands of residential schools, and a myriad of colonial onslaughts including systems oppression, racism and discrimination, poverty, and involvement in the "sorrow systems" and as such, the inclusion of family in any mentoring programs is not only a logical assumption but absolutely critical for healing and development. Research speaks to the resurgence of family based pre-colonial models that clearly define and create responsibility around all family members and communities as natural teachers and mentors. Best practice also supports the practice of Indigenous mentoring programs as a way for Indigenous youth to explore relationships with themselves, each other, with community Elders and their traditional cultures.

2. **Mentoring is Community Healing: Include community – particularly Elders in the program**

   Prior to colonization, "mentoring" was achieved at a family and community level through natural forms of immersion into Indigenous epistemologies, or Issksiniip in Blackfoot; defined as "active participation with the cosmic and natural order/universal intelligence." Community social values shaped behaviors and provided guidance for children/ youth. The whole community contributed to raising children and everyone had a role to play in teaching the young.

   Due to the impacts of colonization on health and wellness, research acknowledges the interface between community mentoring as an important facet of healing and wellness, identity development, cultural immersion, and the resurgence of pre-colonial systems. Community led mentoring can also mitigate contextual risk factors, emphasizing the potential of individual youth and their families through the development of community supported and validated local Indigenous ways of knowing.

The involvement of community members and designing implementation of programs is also critically important. When local community members have genuine input into tailoring their program to the local contexts—and where they have opportunities to participate as mentors that creates ownership of programming processes and outcomes—are more likely to be positive.

3. **Mentoring is Voice: Ensure program is youth/ peer driven**

   Best practice research indicates that successful programs have a strong emphasis and involvement of youth involved in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation.

   This facilitates a sense of ownership, responsibility, and participation in the program, thus fostering a sense of connection.

   The legacies of residential schools, particularly impacting young people who have been parented by survivors of these schools, speaks to the need to build safe and ethical bridges back to learning and healing from their own perspectives. Immersive involvement that is strength-based, built from a youth mentoring perspective, and embedded in a cultural framework are the most successful.

   Maintaining cultural relevance in programming for youth was also noted as an important piece through the development of cultural awareness, identity, and continuity. In these types of programs, Indigenous youth perceived themselves as role models; in their families, communities, and with other youth who are coming out of western systems such as child welfare or group homes without significant cultural or other supports.

4. **Mentoring is Focused on Indigenous/Identity: Use Indigenous role models at all possible**

   Due to the focus on resurgence of both identity and epistemology, a cornerstone of most Indigenous mentoring programs is the criticality of Indigenous role models and mentors; specifically validated Indigenous people who have the rights to teach about traditional values. Multiple research speaks to the value and importance of Indigenous mentorship.

5. **Mentoring is Open to All & Is Safe: Make sure a cultural screening process & training program is developed and used**

   Culturally relevant and appropriate screening criteria must be created for Indigenous mentors due to the fact that potentially effective mentors may not fit conventional screening criteria. For example, Indigenous Australians who have recovered from addictions or discontinued formal criminal activities were seen to have much to share with at-risk youth. Recruitment screens must be culturally appropriate in order to expand the number of Indigenous mentors, with specific criteria to ensure the inclusion of people who typically are excluded as potential mentors.

   Re: program staff/coordinators, applicants must be appropriately trained and supported to ensure the most authentic integration of culture in the program. Training should be done in collaboration with local Indigenous communities and, if possible, local people should be hired to act as both staff/ mentors to ensure cultural congruency. Cultural training for non-Indigenous staff and mentors is crucial but insufficient without co-created Indigenous collaboration as to content and epistemology, prioritization of Elders involvement, or local Indigenous community involvement in the training.

   Additionally, Indigenous mentorship programs may struggle with unequal gender representation among both staff and mentors in the program. For example, in the Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program (IYMP) program, it was routinely found nearly double the number of female mentors vs. male. Without an opportunity to receive guidance from both genders, Indigenous youth miss unique connections and teachings from both female and male role models as leaders in their community.

6. **Mentoring is Long Term & Connected to Existing Indigenous Programs: Fund the programs long term and appropriately**

   Research has demonstrated that any mentoring program must be funded long-term and interconnected to other social programming to be of the most benefit for young people. This is critical for Indigenous mentoring with the understanding that a successful mentoring program would that be one that is connected to other community programs with similar objectives, whether mentoring specific or not. Participation in longer-term programming has resulted in the ability to build new relationships and fortify existing ones within local communities, made possible by programs that were both long-term and linked to other community resources. Relationships were made easier by the creation of supportive “ethical spaces” that are both welcoming and safe environments. Long-term or intergenerational programming achieves transformational results for youth, their families, and communities; it allows more Ame to open up, take on responsibility, and gain more decision-making power.

   Long-term mentoring relationships should run 12 to 18 months duration based on common interest, mutual respect, general friendship, funding, and utilization of nonjudgmental approaches. Strong partnerships between agencies in the local area is also paramount; this includes referral pathways to ensure Indigenous young people are able to access focused services that each organization offers (eg. counseling, health, employment, education, recreate on, culture, other services).

The stability of staffing/mentor roles is also critical; short-term, unstructured programs lasting six months or less may actually harm at-risk Indigenous youth and should be avoided. These programs have the potential to reinforce and re-trigger feelings of loss and disappointment that are often associated with past relationships between youth and adults as well as systems (such as child welfare).

7. **Mentoring is Trauma & History Informed: Address barriers such as poverty, trauma before during and after the program**

   Understanding the legacy of residential school experiences and the impacts upon many—if not most—Indigenous people is crucial in the implementation of mentoring programs. Of those individuals affected, many were schooled or raised in institutions or abusive settings and lack skills necessary as adults to parent their own children in a nurturing manner. Because of this, Indigenous youth who come to programming are often without the basic resources of clothing, transportation, and other supports. For example, families struggle with basic transportation to programs; single parents cannot leave their other children to drive one child; the home or institutional environment lacks connections to culture, language, or community. This begs the question of the effectiveness and cultural congruence of one-one mentorship models for Indigenous families.

   In contrast, "community" has been cited as a source of support for individuals and families who may be disadvantaged due to the legacy of colonization. Indigenous-led, culturally appropriate programming can create both supports and resilience against a range of range of risk factors, addressing the complex needs of young people, as well as their families while they were in the community mentoring program.

8. **Mentoring is Indigenous Culture/ Ceremonies and Ways of Knowing: Build from Indigenous pedagogy(ies)**

   When creating an Indigenous mentorship program, it is vital to consider the foundational models being used. The criticality of Indigenous epistemology in design was the most important construct identified by Elders, academics, and existing programming.

   Many Indigenous youth are disconnected from their community or culture and are looking for ways to reconnect. The use of Indigenous epistemology, or ways of knowing, not only validates pre- colonial values/systems and mentorship models, but has the power to naturally flow culturally relevant opportunities for youth to explore traditional practices. This is especially true for those who do not know, or have lost their connections with, culture and community. Programs that align to community histories are able to authentically address the healing of transgenerational trauma, cultural oppression, and marginalization of Indigenous communities. The use of specific regional/tribally or nation-based worldviews recognizes that each community is unique, and that community and regional differences must honor and be accounted when building community-based mentoring programs. This is also true for urban programming. Programs that are culturally strong and developed from an Indigenous perspective are key to providing transformational experiences.

9. **Mentoring is Whole Person Wellness Focused: Ensure the program is strength based & teaches about language at the core**

   Best practices in Indigenous mentoring have shown to positively affect health and social outcomes as they empower both program participants and their communities through a sense of ownership and cultural identity. Natural laws are an important aspect of Indigenous mentoring, specifically those that focus on developing culturally relevant, strength-based approaches. Culturally-specific mentoring programs enhance primary protective factors such as language learning, cultural connectedness, and the development of positive cultural identities. Mentoring programs that elevate identity and culture influence future successes. For Indigenous youth, resiliency is tied to a strong family/community and support networks that establish a sense of belonging and identity.

   Positive engagement and re-emergence in community activities helps to establish positive lifestyle outcomes and attitudes that affect physical, mental, and spiritual health. In this way, mental health and other outcomes of Indigenous mentoring programs must be understood as not only that of the individual youth, but as a family and community collective.

Additional Considerations to the Principles – Venue, Action, Language, Song (VALS)

Underlying the nine principles is Venue, Action, Language, and Song (VALS), considerations that assist in the development and success of Indigenous mentorship programming. VALS speaks to the environment, spaces, and approaches that a program may establish as part of delivery and development.

Venue

Venue as a noun is the place where everyone gathers for a common purpose. Oral cultural protocols or rules are paralleled to specific gathering places. Venue is also a verb – actioning ethical and safe spaces to share thoughts, observation, and stories through in-person and face-to-face interaction.

- Connect the program to existing social programs in the community
- Recognize Regional, or tribal, community Nation differences and pertinent
- legislation in:
    - Bill C92 First Nations/Métis Nations
    - Urban Communities

Action

Action demonstrates the ability of the program to deliver an approach that is not only helpful but moves participants forward on their healing journeys by building meaningful changes through relationships to each other, and everything around them. Program for:

- Cultural/Spiritual Activity: Cultural/Identity Re-Vitalization
- Mental Activity: Education/ Employment
- Physical Activity: Health & Wellness

Language

Language may be verbal or nonverbal, with the Venue determining what type of language—or approach—should be used. The approach to language should be embedded within the processes of each of the 9 principles.

- Mentoring is Family Healing: Include family in the program
- Mentoring is Community Healing: Include community – particularly Elders in the program
- Mentoring is Voice: Ensure program is youth/peer driven
- Mentoring is Focused on Indigenous/Identity: Use Indigenous role models at all possible
- Mentoring is Open to All & Is Safe: Make sure a cultural screening process & training program is developed and used
- Mentoring is Long Term & Connected to Existing Indigenous Programs: Fund the programs long term and appropriately
- Mentoring is Trauma & History Informed: Address barriers such as poverty, trauma before during and after the program

- Mentoring is Indigenous Culture/ Ceremonies and Ways of Knowing
- Mentoring is Whole Person Wellness Focused: Make sure the program is strength based & teaches about language at the core

Song

Song is the final achievement given to the participant at the end of the program. This is intended to support the youth on their continued journey by acknowledging the strengths of their commitment. The participant may receive validation of their journey and how far they have progressed since entering the program.

The program may be validated with community Elders and leadership/program participants and community. Teachings received through ceremony and/or participation acknowledges the success and "completion" of the program.

- Song is a critical aspect of the youth's personal journey. They do not simply "graduate" out of the program; Song is a parallel to receiving a "certificate" and may help in encouraging the youth to continue their journey upon transitioning out of a system or into a new set of circumstances.
- As teachings become entrenched, and the youth becomes stronger and healthier by living a good life (emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally), they may become teachers and mentors themselves, building capacity within the community and ensuring a larger cultural continuity.

This information was developed by Mahegun Tails, Inc. in consultation with Indigenous Elders, relevant Indigenous organizations, and a literature review as extracted from An Indigenous Mentorship Approach: Building Back Relationships through "The Grandparents" – Principles & Recommendations (November 2024)

The photo's used throughout this document are from CIRA and Indigenous People in Education