Seeds of Encouragement: Initiating an Aboriginal Youth Mentorship Program

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In this article the authors, a multi-age, cross-cultural team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal co-researchers, present the preliminary findings of a youth mentoring program designed to involve Aboriginal high school youth in designing and delivering an after-school physical activity, nutrition, and education program for children in an elementary school in Winnipeg. The mentoring program was organized as a qualitative, community-based, participatory action research study. Through weekly after-school mentoring sessions, a group of 12 high school Aboriginal youth developed and delivered a program of low-organized games, snacks, and educational activities for approximately 25 elementary students. The study design incorporated holistic models of youth engagement informed by Brendtro, Brokenleg, and van Bockern's (1998) Circle of Courage and other Aboriginal education practices.

Introduction

This article describes the genesis of an Aboriginal[1] youth mentorship program. The mentoring program invited Aboriginal high school youth in a large multicultural suburban school to work collaboratively with a team of university researchers to develop and deliver an after-school physical activity, nutrition, and education program for children in a neighboring elementary school. As a team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal co-researchers involving a graduate student, an undergraduate student, a high school community member, and two professors, we wished to ensure that the qualitative, community-based research project recognized the necessity for Aboriginal peoples to define themselves (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000), ensuring that Aboriginal perspectives and epistemologies were validated (Bishop, 1998). The mentoring program incorporated our research team's shared understandings of youth engagement, participatory action research, and Aboriginal community-based research; each of these research approaches directed us to develop respectful relationships with the Aboriginal youth with whom we collaborated to design the program. Throughout the research project we worked to ensure that the research was connected to and served the community (Deloria, 1991;

Weber-Pillwax, 2001). It was imperative that the research be conducted in and alongside the urban Aboriginal youth community.

Youth Engagement
Numerous organizations in both Canada and the United States have employed diverse forms of engagement in an effort better to service the dreams and needs of youth. This has led to a range of ideas about what *youth engagement* is and how it should look in a real setting. The Laidlaw Foundation (2001), an organization dedicated to improving outcomes related to the well-being of children and youth, define youth engagement as a process of meaningful, voluntary participation of youth aged 12-24 years in the decision-making and governance of organizations and programs. Effective youth engagement programs are seen to produce results such as "an impact or contribution toward change; an increase in youth's understanding of what impacts them; shared power between youth and adults; youth opinions, perspectives are valued; and, youth building their vocabulary of experiences" (p. 1).

Aboriginal, Community-Based, Participatory Action Research
The mentoring program was part of a larger participatory action research (PAR) study (Forsyth, Heine, & Halas, 2007) that investigated how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples can work together to create healthier and more supportive environments for urban Aboriginal youth in sport and recreation. In her article "Ethics of Aboriginal Research," Brant Castellano (2004) discusses how PAR "has received a positive reception in Aboriginal communities and has gained acceptance in some quarters of the research community" (p. 106). Similarly, Cochran et al. (2008) suggest PAR as a research approach that can be used in Aboriginal communities where researchers wish to respect Indigenous ways of knowing. The PAR approach offered us a framework to become directly involved as co-researchers/program developers with our Aboriginal youth participants to investigate a "problem of practice" (Sumara & Carson, 1997), which was an identified need for more physical activity opportunities in their school community.

In terms of specific research activities, our data collection involved audiotaped recordings of our mentor team planning and programming meetings, including a weekly debriefing session with the high school mentors and our university team. Other research activities included individual interviews with high school participants and school staff, as well as documentation of program planning ideas. In addition, the university mentor team kept field journals where they recorded their own experiences in the program; we draw on these experiences for this article.

In a description of Kaupapa Maori research or Maori-centered research, Tuhiwai Smith (1999) shares the guideline "Titiro, whakarongo … korero (Look, listen … speak)" (p. 120) as one of the codes of conduct for

researchers to follow. In our efforts to initiate the mentor program along-side the youth, we sought to follow the principle of noninterference by adopting a *look, listen, speak* approach. Brant Castellano (2004) speaks of Clare Brant's conception of noninterference, and writes: "While non-inter-fering behaviour may be perceived as passive and irresponsible, Brant points out that it is consistent with teaching based on non-intrusive modelling rather than direct instruction that attempts to shape the be-haviour of the learner" (p. 100). As we chose to look, listen, then speak in our interactions with the youth participants, we hoped that all our strengths and ideas would emerge and that our youth would engage in the project as they defined.

Aboriginal youth have already demonstrated their willingness to work to improve their social environment. They have formed their own national assemblies to meet, discuss, and strategize on key issues that affect their everyday lives. They are also connecting to one another through member-ships in national political organizations such as the National Association of Friendship Centers, Métis Council of Canada, Native Women's Associa-tion of Canada, Inuit Tapirisat Kanatami, and the Assembly of First Na-tions in order to address issues that are important to them. They have used the power of the media to engage other Aboriginal youth on critical issues like land claims, substance abuse, violence, education, sovereignty, and self-determination. They have created the Aboriginal Youth Network Web site *SAY Magazine* and the award-winning, youth-driven television pro-gram *Seven Generations*.

Clearly Aboriginal youth have shown a deep interest in and commit-ment to talking about the future of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Aboriginal youth in our communities have confirmed our inherent belief that youth hold the capacity and want opportunities to be engaged and serve our communities (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). We tried to energize this commitment to a better future through the mentor program.

In accordance with initiatives recommended by the Working Group for the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy (1999) whereby young people are encouraged to participate in sports, recreation, and active living "at the community level to help Aboriginal youth develop leadership and other skills" (p. 26), we worked in collaboration with an urban school district, its teachers, administrators, staff and students. In this district, the Aboriginal student population is approximately 10% of the total district's student population. This number reflects Winnipeg's self-identified Aboriginal population according to Statistics Canada's 2006 Census data (Statistics Canada, 2007). The number of Aboriginal staff in the school district, al-though undocumented, is estimated to represent less than 6% of the edu-cational staff.[2] Notably, one of the goals of the Aboriginal youth

mentorship program is to encourage Aboriginal high school students to consider teaching as a career.

Foundational to our work was our adherence to a principal recommendation for working with and responding to youth, that is, we recognized the "strength, abilities, talent and energy of young people" (Health Canada, 1999) who were part of the mentor program. Focusing on strengths, not on perceived weaknesses, opens opportunities for youth to make positive changes in their lives (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2001) and to break down negative perceptions between adults and youth (Laidlaw Foundation, 2001). As Saleebey (1997) states about the concept of *strengths* in a social work context, any setting contains many untapped and unsolicited resources. We believe that this is particularly true for Aboriginal youth in schools.

Furthermore, in building our relationships, we acknowledged how cultural differences can shape how youth engage with community. As Dominiguez, Fielding, and Perrault (2001) found in a Winnipeg study on youth engagement, for young Aboriginal men and women, youth engagement means working with respected members of their communities who can help build their self-esteem, encourage them to become more culturally active, and show them how to become more involved in their local settings. In our case we recognized the cultural capital of numerous urban Aboriginal youth leaders that made up our university research team and community allies. To further strengthen our research team we looked to the students and leaders in the high school settings. As a commitment to hiring community members for the research project, we immediately identified Joe[3] (third author) as a respected member of his youth community. Joe demonstrated cultural awareness, leadership, dedication, and excellent interpersonal skills, all of which are consistent with a cultural approach to youth engagement (Dominguez et al.). As the project unfolded, we continually looked to Joe for guidance as a key member of our research/mentor team. Thus we disrupted the customary hierarchical power relations by immediately creating (paid) space for a youth leader in the research project.

Research as Situated Response
In an article that describes "research methods as situated response," Hermes (1998) writes retrospectively about her experiences as a researcher in a First Nations community. Hermes calls for the use of methods that are particular and context-dependent, rooted in relationships of reciprocity and respect.

I define a "community-based" research project as one that revolves around the perceived needs of the community rather than one that is dictated by academic protocols or traditions. I understand the idea of community-based research as a way of devoting time, attention, thought, and sometimes actions to areas that are defined as problematic to the community itself. (p. 164)

Similarly, in two overlapping research studies at the same school site, the need for opportunities to be more physically active emerged as a concern for many youth.

Specifically, the idea for a mentoring program evolved from an earlier research study that investigated the experience of physical education for Aboriginal youth (Champagne & Halas, 2003; van Ingen, & Halas, 2004). In focus groups and individual interviews with Aboriginal youth, a number of issues arose related to the young people's access to physical activity opportunities in urban school contexts. Although public high schools provide multiple extracurricular sport opportunities for youth, many Aboriginal youth were not participating in these programs. Importantly, a number of youth believed they were not given a fair chance to try out for their school's teams (Champagne & Halas, 2003). These students wished to be more involved, and in response, Joannie (fourth author) used the resources of an initial PAR project to initiate an after-school physical activity/leadership program at a large suburban high school. Initially, the successes were small; with limited access to physical activity space only a few youth showed up for the twice-weekly program.

It was in discussing the roadblocks to activity space that the idea of designing games for children surfaced. Amy (a graduate student and first author of this article) was teaching at an elementary school nearby and invited the Aboriginal youth, by this time a semi-regular group of mostly boys in grades 10 and 11, to help her organize lunch-hour games for her grade 2 students. Amy booked the elementary gym, allowing our leadership group to meet one day after school. Joannie taught the youth low-organized games that they could then teach to Amy's grade 2 students. Thus began the genesis of an idea of a mentor program that would be built in community with youth, addressing issues of importance to youth.

Schools are important sites for interacting with young people (Health Canada, 1999). Thus when the current larger research project was conceptualized, we intentionally worked to continue the relationships developed in the earlier research study. With an enhanced focus on cultural approaches to Aboriginal youth sport and recreation (Forsyth et al., 2007), we again partnered with the high school from the earlier study to explore further the possibility of developing a mentoring program that incorporated physical activity, leadership training, Aboriginal youth engagement, and perceived community needs.

Rather than prescribing a set of predetermined research methods (which are conceived without community input), Hermes (1998) describes a process "that cannot be replicated but that is situated within the particular relationships among myself and the community members" (p. 165). Similarly, our community-based research design focused on the development of respectful relationships (with the youth and school officials) and applied a flexible data-collection protocol where documents used in the

training of mentors (e.g., university mentors' journals, activity binders, planning notes) were compiled and conversations held in planning and debriefing sessions were recorded for later analysis. Amy, who had multiple roles (Hermes, 1998) as a teacher-researcher in the project, provided a vision of the program delivery model, which included a necessary preprogram training period before the high school mentors would begin activity programs for the children in grades 3-5. We booked gym space at the elementary school for two days after school each week, and once the elementary children joined the program, we used one day for planning and training with the high school mentors and a second day for program delivery.

Although Aboriginal high school students were targeted as mentors, we decided collaboratively to include students from all cultural backgrounds as activity participants at the elementary school. The focus on Aboriginal high school youth was consistent with our research goals of incorporating cultural approaches to urban Aboriginal physical activity, and we believed that there would be multiple benefits in working cross-culturally with younger students. Given our concern that many Aboriginal youth were not experiencing affirmation in their high schools and/or communities (van Ingen & Halas, 2006), we valued the opportunity to feature these young people as positive role models for the younger multicultural cohort of students.

Further solidifying the cross-cultural nature of our project, our university mentor team included Amy, who is Métis; Alex, a non-Aboriginal university student who was completing an education degree and had plans to teach physical education (second author); and Joe, an Ojibwa student who was completing his grade 12 requirements at an inner-city high school. Working with university researchers who were both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal (including Janice, the fifth author, and Joannie), Amy, Alex, and Joe were responsible for facilitating the process of youth engagement during the weekly mentor meetings. Beyond working to involve the youth in meaningful ways that would bring out their strengths and perspectives on how the program should unfold, Amy, Alex, and Joe also inserted a variety of Aboriginal educational practices that Amy regularly incorporates as a Métis educator. These included sharing circles (Hart, 1996) where all participants had an opportunity to voice their opinions; balancing physical, social, emotional, and intellectual activities that demonstrate a more holistic approach to educational programming (Calliou, 1995); the physical setup of the room (e.g., arranging tables and chairs in a circle to encourage collective dialogue); and including traditional Aboriginal games and activities.

In the end a group of 10 to 12 Aboriginal high school students[4] from diverse cultural backgrounds met regularly with our university research/mentor team to develop and design the weekly program of gym

games, nutritional snacks,[5] and educational activities for up to 25 children. As children, youth, and adults, we were a cross-cultural, multi-age cohort of co-researchers, each mentoring the other in multiple ways as we collaboratively explored the development of our own mentorship model. For the remainder of this article, we draw on the theoretical model of the Circle of Courage (Brendtro et al., 1998) to inform our analysis of how the values of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity shaped the students' engagement in the mentorship program, thus providing an orientation toward youth engagement that was informed by Aboriginal perspectives.

Seeds of Encouragement: Initiating the Mentor Program

The Circle of Courage is informed by Native American knowledge and epistemologies that incorporate traditional Native American teachings on interdependent relationships. According to Brendtro et al. (1998), traditional Native American world views carried the wisdom that every child is a sacred gift and that it is our collective responsibility to nurture and develop that gift. The Circle of Courage begins in the east, where the sun rises, and moves in a clockwise direction, with each direction providing a teaching related to healthy child development. Described as seeds of encouragement, the Circle of Courage model addresses four constructs related to developing a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Although other Aboriginal world views were used to inform the program development, it was the Circle of Courage model that enabled us to frame and understand the question: How can we support and empower children and youth who are often pushed out of schooling institutions to recognize the leadership qualities that they each carry? Believing in the intelligence and talents of Aboriginal youth, we worked with the young people in our study to encourage them to be physically active in their communities, to use their strengths to foster community development, and to empower each individual to recognize the strengths that he or she had to share.

In the following section, four members of the research team tell their stories about each of the four Circle of Courage teachings. Written as first-person narratives, the university mentor team discuss their own roles in the research and how they interpreted their experiences in the first few weeks of the mentor program.

The Spirit of Belonging:

The universal longing for human bonds is nurtured by relationships of trust so the child can say, "I am loved." (Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2003, p. 23)

Amy's story

As an educator who has the opportunity to work alongside young children every day, I have often reflected on how much easier it is for everyone

to live and learn together when each knows that he or she is loved, cherished, celebrated, and that everyone belongs. Just as it is imperative that young children feel that sense of belonging, people of all ages need to know that they belong. And so we began the mentor program with the knowledge that everyone, including our university mentors, needed to develop a sense of belonging in our school space and among one another before we would be able to engage meaningfully with each other.

As an initial step, our mentor group claimed a meeting place to call our own in the elementary school. On our first mentoring day, we met the high school students and university mentor team in the elementary school office, then quickly moved to the waiting multipurpose room (MPR), which was a simple space with tables, chairs, a fridge, and enough room just to hang out. It was here that the high school mentors and our university team awkwardly met those first few weeks, where we shared shy conversations. Week by week, as we taped photos on the walls, stored supplies in the cupboards, left games on side tables, took over the fridge with our food, and filled the MPR with our laughter, the room was transformed into *our* space. In contrast to examples of Aboriginal students struggling to claim an affirming space in their larger cross-cultural schools (van Ingen & Halas, 2006), the elementary school became a transforming space where Aboriginal youth were viewed as collaborative partners, working alongside school staff, university mentors, and elementary school students.

Soon they became respected members of the elementary school community, and having this identifiable, welcoming space proved to be a crucial first step for programming. From the first week to the second, our claimed space assured the newcomers of their place in our school community. The differences in our group's sense of belonging from that first week to the next were palpable. So much so that a few teaching colleagues commented on the changed body language of the mentors from their initial visit to the school when they walked in hesitantly, to their purposeful arrival each subsequent week.

A second enabling factor in the program was food. With nutritious snacks built into our program delivery budget, we immediately learned how food provided not only an attraction, but also a social function. We all looked forward (as all kids do) to an after-school snack, often making requests for the next day's healthy treat. We would gather round the table and informally catch up on life, share stories, and laugh as we slowly built genuine reciprocal relationships of respect. The food also served as an important, yet unintentional invitation for school staff, who would often come to the MPR to grab a bite and visit with the high school students. These adult-student interactions were relaxed and respectful and helped break down the schism that often exists between teachers and students, adults and youth (a goal of youth engagement). Furthermore, the forma-

tion of positive cross-cultural relations between the Aboriginal youth and the mostly non-Aboriginal teaching staff was significant given the racial tensions that often lead to negative perceptions being held by both groups toward the other (Barnhardt, 2005).

Eventually, the confidence we shared in the meeting space spread throughout the rest of the school. The gym was ours every day from 3:45 to 6:00 p.m. The equipment room was left wide open for us with a clear, trusting expectation that we would take care of the equipment and clean up after ourselves, which we always did. The computer lab became our space to create and save résumés. At one point or another, the library, staffroom, and common areas all belonged to us. The students strolled through the hallways with respect for themselves, others, and the school facility. This sense of belonging provided the foundation for all our efforts to engage the youth purposefully and extended our own understanding of the process of Aboriginal youth engagement in cross-cultural environments. Given the marginalized positions of Aboriginal youth in the larger non-Aboriginal Canadian society (Burstein, 2005), strategies to recognize and celebrate Aboriginal youth in the physical and social spaces of the school program rather than striving toward conformity are imperative to empowerment and success (Cajete, 1994).

The Spirit of Mastery

The child's inborn thirst for learning is nurtured; learning to cope with the world the child can say, "I can succeed." (Brokenleg et al., 2003, p. 23)

Alex's story

Initially, the high school students did not recognize the effect that they could have on others and in their community. Over time they came to feel that their program was necessary for the elementary school, just as they as people were needed in the lives of the younger students. Based on the successes that they experienced, the high school students involved in the mentorship program demonstrated increased in self-confidence and sense of pride.

As mentioned by Amy, it took some time for all of us to feel as if we belonged. Just as I had uncertainties about my role among the university mentors, the high school mentors seemed unsure of what they were expected to do and how they fitted into the group. The high school mentors did not all know each other before our program, and many of them appeared shy in the beginning. This led to reluctance to share ideas and opinions about planning. It was also a chore at times to get everyone to participate in some of the low-organized games that may not have been "age-appropriate" or "cool" for high school students.

Nevertheless, as the high school mentors' sense of belonging seemed to increase, so did their willingness to contribute and participate actively in the program planning. Viewed in retrospect, this gradual improvement

was quite obvious. However, at the time I must admit that I was worried about how the program would turn out once the elementary students started coming. I was afraid that the high school mentors' hesitancy to participate would lead to difficulties when they stepped forward to lead the activity program. My perception changed dramatically one Thursday a few weeks into the training sessions. That Thursday we were pleased to see that most of the high school mentors were in attendance. The day before only three had shown up. Not knowing exactly what to do with so few, we decided to have them plan a day of programming. The next day the three that had attended would act as the high school mentors and the rest of the group would play the role of the younger students. We thought it would be a good simulation that might highlight areas where we needed to improve before we were ready for the real *youngers* (a term that Amy shared from her multiage classroom, which parallels *olders*). Although I consciously demonstrated full confidence in the three mentors, I was secretly afraid that the others might not listen to them or would not wish to participate in the planned activities. After all, I had experienced difficulties in that respect myself and had yet to master the art of communicating with these older students.

After one of the three leaders for the day had prepared and shared the snack with the rest of the group, we headed to the gym where Brodie (all names are pseudonyms) was set to lead the low-organized games. This would be the first time that a high school mentor peer had taught a gym game to the group. Just as he was starting to explain the game, Joannie appeared at the entrance to the gym. As I walked over to greet her, I watched Brodie step forward to start his lesson. Wearing a hooded sweatshirt that draped over his body from head to low-hanging, baggy jeans, he shouted out instructions to the group. Although they were not giving him their full attention, when he said, "Go," the game was under way. Everyone played, and the game ran smoothly.

Joannie's face lit up with astonishment as I met her at the gym door. This was her first visit to Nearby Elementary School to meet the mentors, and she greeted me saying, "Wow, this is great!" Given past efforts to organize after-school programs at the high school, she explained how thrilled she was with the turnout. I remember her telling me that she did not mean to interrupt and that I could go back to the group. Looking on, we both realized that everything was completely under control without me.

Before Joannie had walked in, I was looking at Brodie's delivery fairly critically. As I watched him, I was looking for issues to bring up later from which we could all learn in our debriefing session. My high expectations for the high school mentors had made me fairly hard to please. But at that moment, as I saw the mentors through Joannie's eyes, I was taken aback. Brodie, who happened to be the youngest of the mentors, was leading his

peers and doing as good a job of keeping their attention and getting them to participate as I ever had. I realized how far we had come as a group and particularly how the high school mentors were becoming masters of their own program. There was no doubt that many incremental successes were happening each day as the mentors began to express their opinions, take on responsibility for new tasks, and just show up willing to see how things would unfold. As they worked to develop new skills in communicating and teaching, I realized how each student did want to learn, despite how shy and reluctant they appeared. Mastery takes time and happens in ways that are not always evident, particularly for Aboriginal youth whose choice to observe first can be interpreted (especially by non-Aboriginal teachers) as unwillingness to learn. In this regard I have learned to see mastery differently.

The Spirit of Independence

The child's free will is nurtured by increased responsibility so that the child can say, "I have power to make decisions." (Brokenleg et al., 2003, p. 23)

Joe's story

When we first began the mentor program, I would go to the high school to meet the students at 3:30 p.m., and we would often run into one another in the hallways. At first I would have to chase them down and ask them, "Hey there, where are you going to?" and the student would say, "Ummm, nowhere … I'm just going to get my jacket, I'll be right there." From the hallway I would head toward the school office, where I would wait for them and hope that they would come back. I went to the high school to meet the students for a couple of weeks. After a few weeks my role changed from chasing the students down to welcoming them at the elementary school because they started to walk to the school on their own, often arriving early to prepare for the day.

I still remember that first day when Alex and I went to meet the high school students. We walked with the students from the high school to the elementary school, a distance of about three city blocks. Shortly after leaving the high school, the students asked if they could smoke. In response Alex and I just looked at each other and said, "We don't see anything," and I just suggested that they butt out their smokes before we got to the school, which they did.

After a while, when the high school students were coming on their own, they mentioned to me that they were butting out their smokes long before they were close to the elementary school because they were concerned that the students would see them smoking. I thought it was pretty cool that the mentors decided to butt out on their own without our telling them what to do. The mentors demonstrated their own independence among themselves. Had we told them to butt out, I wonder if we would have had the same response, particularly as we were just getting to know

them. I know that many people working with youth and sharing research related to youth promote the need for youth to make their own decisions. However, I wonder if a young person's independence would be fully respected in all cases, such as smoking, which is seen as a real health hazard.

How I responded to the youth was based on my own experiences as an Aboriginal person and youth. My responses to many of the interactions with the mentor group came naturally and reflected how I would like people respectfully to interact with me. From what other people on the research team, the mentors and observers, shared it was these respectful interactions that showed the high school mentors that we believed they were strong individuals who were more then capable of making decisions that were right for them. In the Circle of Courage model, youth choices are fully respected, and I think that this is important, particularly for Aboriginal youth.

The Spirit of Generosity

The child's character is nurtured by concern for others so that the child can say, "I have a purpose for my life." (Brokenleg et al., 2003, p. 23)

Joannie's story

Two years before the start of this mentor program, I had tried to organize an after-school physical activity leadership program for Aboriginal youth at the high school. As mentioned above, it was challenging to get students to participate because we could not access any physical activity space in the school. We played broomball (a common winter sport in Canada and the northern US), collected information on Aboriginal youth leadership programs from the Web, and planned a trip to the university. Like Joe, I waited each day wondering which students would show up. When a group of four to five young men started to come out more regularly, I sometimes wondered how successful we would be. Like Alex, I found the students very quiet and hesitant to put forward their ideas. Then one day, Amy dropped by the program. As the group of four Aboriginal young men, Amy, and I chatted over banana bread and juice, we wondered aloud whether the young men would be interested in helping run a lunch hour of low-organized games for Amy's grade 2 students. The frigid tempera-tures of a Manitoba winter were causing a number of indoor lunch hours, and Amy's younger elementary students looked forward to opportunities to play and expend energy. In making the connection between the elemen-tary students' desires to be active and the coinciding lunch hour of the young men who were regularly involved, we appealed to the youths' sense of leadership and altruism.

Over the next few weeks, these young men walked over to Amy's school at lunchtime and played simple low-organized games with her class. With Amy's help, they laughed as they led activities for the children,

who looked up to them with the enthusiasm I used to feel when I was little and my big brother would play with me. I remember Amy's joy telling me how one of her grade 2 students had seen one of the high school students walk by her house and yelled out, "There's my teacher." Amy recounted the feelings of pride that the high school students shared with her about their relationships with the children in her class. Amy shared stories of how the high school students would show up to talk to her when they were having trouble in school or at home, how she kept in touch with them through their siblings or cousins who attended her school, and how they would often pop into the classroom to spend time with their new younger friends. What began as a minimalist intervention appeared to produce powerful results, all from playing a few games with younger children. I learned how purposeful an appeal to one's sense of service can be, even when the generosity of time and energy is limited to a few lunch hours playing games. In this case, small seeds of encouragement blossomed into the current project, where the young people's spirit of generosity produces multiple outcomes, with multiple benefits for the mentors, the elementary schoolchildren, our research team, and the two school communities.

Mentors Teaching Mentors: Who is the Real Mentor Here?
(Knowledges Shared/Gained)

In their evaluation model for youth engagement programs, the Laidlaw Foundation (2001) describes learning circles where success stories are shared and challenges of engaging youth are discussed. Borrowing from this model, we conclude this article by presenting key learning outcomes that we each experienced from our respective roles in the research program.

Amy

The question of *who is the real mentor here?* is compelling. From a hierarchical perspective that shapes many educational settings, one would typically think that Joannie should be mentoring me, I should be mentoring Alex, Alex mentoring Joe, and so on. Yet in my own role as a mentor, I believe that I have learned far more then I could have ever shared, and the learning came from all directions. Each week I would walk away with new teachings and insights that continue to inform my relationships today. One of the greatest gifts was how much wisdom the youth shared. They were continually the leaders for all of us. This was true throughout the study, but it was most obvious when the elementary schoolchildren joined the program.

On that first day of program implementation, 40 people squished into the MPR, and the nervousness that we all felt was overwhelming. Somehow Abigail led the way for us. She charismatically went up to both of her assigned younger partners and said, "Hi, I'm Abigail. What are your

names?" Her confidence and self-assurance in what we were doing allowed us all to breathe a little easier. Another mentor for all of us was Chris, who was always optimistic about how cool his younger buddies were. Whenever our group was feeling discouraged by the actions of some of the elementary schoolchildren, Chris was always there to reassure us how great the group was and remind us how much fun we were having. One day the mentors went far beyond even our high expectations, thanks in part to a series of miscommunications. Contrary to what actually happened, Joe, Alex, and I each thought the other would be available one Thursday to start the day's activity and have the food prepared on time.

Barely noticing that we were not there, the high school students stepped forward and got everything ready, preparing the juice and food in anticipation of the 25 younger students who would excitedly pile in after the school bell rang. It was not until I walked into the room about 10 minutes into everything that I realized just how much we needed each of them and how they were continually mentors for all of us.

Throughout the program we worked to recognize and celebrate the strengths and gifts that each individual brought to our interconnected circle (Couture, 1991). We respected each individual to share his or her strengths and gifts with the larger group. We collaboratively worked toward noninterference, choosing to teach by example respectfully (Ross, 1992, 1996). As Joe and Alex demonstrated in their initial interactions with the youth and their questions about smoking, as Joannie and Janice had demonstrated in their trust of our abilities as co-researchers, and as we have all attempted to demonstrate in our interactions as co-researchers (inclusive of our multi-age, multi-institutional research team of youth mentors, early years students, university staff, university students, and allies), it is up to each of us to share our gifts and respect one another enough to recognize that they will share theirs. It was with this sense of respect for individuals and recognition of the strength in the larger group that our first year of mentor programming flourished.

Alex

As an education student, I am looking forward to becoming an elementary physical education teacher. I have always enjoyed teaching others, particularly young people, and I look forward to the challenges of being a teacher. Like many other teachers, I am entering the teaching profession because I want to have a positive effect on the lives of the students I work with. One of the valuable lessons I have learned throughout the course of this mentoring program is that teachers need to realize the importance of the relationships they build with their students. This became clear to me as I took the high school mentors on a tour of the University of Manitoba shortly after the conclusion of the mentoring program.

On the bus ride to the university, I overheard the conversation of a few girls behind me. "I would never want to be a teacher," one of them said. I

interrupted and asked her why she felt that way. "Because of kids like us. We hate teachers. I don't want to get hated on."

When I asked them if they hated all their teachers, they said Yes until one of them mentioned Mrs. Smith. The others agreed and talked about how nice that teacher was. They told stories about how she would treat them with respect and even give them bannock on occasion. Those comments stuck with me for a long time, and I still think about them often. If my assumptions about teachers wanting to help young people are accurate, then how could these students feel as if only one among dozens of their teachers was a true ally?

I found it interesting that when the high school mentors spoke of teachers, they did not include Amy, who they all knew was a teacher, or myself or Joe for that matter. Perhaps they did not think of us as teachers because we did not fit the traditional model of *teacher* that they were used to. I believe that there were strong positive relationships between all the university mentors and the high school mentors. I also know that the high school mentors exceeded all expectations in our program. Therefore, I have learned that when I start teaching, following provincial curriculum, marking tests, and even sharing information, none of these activities will ever be as important as being a good mentor for my students.

Joe

Throughout this article we have discussed youth participation and engagement. It was through my involvement as a youth participant that I became connected to this research project. I started some years ago as a research participant in an inner-city high school that I was attending. I regularly played in the after-school drop-in physical activity program and took part in a focus group interview about my experiences in physical education. When I left that school for a year, I was offered a research position as a supervisor in the after-school program at my former high school. I had moved from being a regular participant in that program to becoming a leader in terms of organizing the overall program. Then this past year I was offered a new position with this mentor group that was connected to a suburban high school and an elementary school. At the time, I had returned to my former high school to complete my grade 12 studies. As I worked toward graduating, I worked with the mentor program and participated in the after-school program, which was still offered as part of the larger research project.

At first I was not too sure about the mentor job and what I was supposed to do with the mentorship program. I felt shy, but I did want to be involved, so I started by observing and helping out where I could. When I met Amy, Alex, and the high school mentors, I observed each of them to see how they became involved in the program, each in his or her own unique way. One thing I learned about myself was how when people say, "it's hard to build relationships with students," I do not find it hard at

all. As the program went on, I discovered more about the mentorship job, and I found it really awesome. I was surprised by how the students relied on me and would look to me for support in varied and unexpected ways. Because of my work in this program, I was recently offered a job as an educational assistant/youth worker at the suburban high school, and I hope to become a teacher one day. In terms of lessons learned, I realize that it is important to trust your instincts (observe before acting); that way you can learn from everyone and grow from your experiences.

Joannie and Janice

The lesson we have learned relates to the process of conducting community-based research, particularly when the community we speak of is a diverse group of Aboriginal youth in an urban, multicultural school setting. As academics with multiple teaching, research, and professional responsibilities, we often wonder if we would ever have adequate time to truly engage in *community* meaningfully. We have learned by listening to the stories shared by Joe, Alex, and Amy—which in turn are stories lived by the high school mentors and elementary school participants—that we can learn from others' lived experiences. As qualitative researchers we should know this because good research methods will produce the anticipated results. Yet we still inherently wonder how, if we were not *there* for each day of the mentor program, we can know it. As we reflectively write this article, we are learning how as educators and researchers we have gained tremendous insights into how we can support youth to engage actively in physical activity programs. We have learned that giving up control, delegating full responsibility for a project to others, and stepping deep into the background can produce important and often unexpected results. In undertaking this mentor project, we have learned multiple lessons, not the least of which is the value of working in community, with community, to build community, even as we stand on the periphery of that community.

Concluding Remarks

Strengths theorists do not believe that the world is the best possible world. We believe that building on strengths and positives is the best way to make the world, individually and collectively, a better place to live. (Baikie, 2003, p. 75)

In a discussion that compares the Circle of Courage model to research on resilience, positive youth development, and self-esteem, Brokenleg and van Bockern (2003) present strong evidence of how the Circle of Courage values apply across time and cultures. They call for schools to honor the voices of youth by involving them meaningfully: "By enlisting youth in improving their schools, we create a climate of mutual respect. This requires valuing the strengths and potentials of all students, even those with broken Circles of Courage" (p. 25). Our research affirms the power of the Circle of Courage model, as we have learned the important roles that

belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity played in our efforts to engage the youth participants meaningfully. We believe that these values extend our understanding of mainstream youth engagement processes. Once belongingness is developed, efforts to master skills can take place in a context that respects the full independence of all youth participants and builds on their willingness to give of themselves.

As a first, exploratory attempt to design and deliver an Aboriginal youth mentorship program that encouraged young people to play together in supportive ways, we believe that we have achieved benefits for our youth participants and their school communities. We have also learned how traditional Aboriginal values such as noninterference and observation are key components of effective youth mentoring and can inform mainstream models of youth engagement. For us these traditional values were instructive.

As youths exit the program, they have developed new skills, friendships, and educational relationships with adults in a neighboring school that has in many respects become their own school. Although we have more work to do in supporting Aboriginal youth as they seek how to be engaged in more holistic educational experiences in their high school, we believe that we are making progress. Crucially, the youth, as mentors for us as educators, have provided many lessons on how to engage young children. We look forward to repeating the program based on the wisdom gained from the youth in this round of the mentoring program, showing how Aboriginal youth are providing the way for a healthy future for all children.

Notes

[1]*Aboriginal* refers to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples as referenced in the Canadian Constitution, 1982 in sections 25 and 35 respectively. In the discussion, when referencing other people's work, we use the identifying terms provided in the original source (e.g., Indigenous, Native American).

[2]A recent survey by the Aboriginal Education Directorate (Government of Manitoba, 2006) reports that 6.1% of the Manitoba teaching population self-identifies as Aboriginal. The participating school division appears to have fewer Aboriginal teachers than the provincial estimate and has developed a community postsecondary teacher education program with the intent to increase the number of Aboriginal educators it employs.

[3]We decided to use our given names rather than pseudonyms. Our given names help to share parts of who we are and how we are related to the mentorship program. Pseudonyms are used for all of our youth participants.

[4]Of the 1,200 plus students at the high school, approximately 10% were Aboriginal.

[5]As an ethic of our research team's accountability to the local Aboriginal community, all our food was purchased from an inner-city Aboriginal-owned cooperative, thus ensuring that this aspect of the research budget was used to support the employment of Aboriginal people in the area.

Authors' Notes

Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Aboriginal Research: Research Grants program.

This article was constructed based on the experiences of our mentor research team following our first year of programming. Since the writing of this article the mentorship program has been expanded to include two high school mentor groups, four early-years schools, and four interconnected/overlapping mentor research teams that supported the programs. In the summer of 2008, a "Summer Rec and Read" program was initiated in the same school division (as reported in this article), and Aboriginal high school and university mentors have been hired to run a summer camp based on the Aboriginal youth mentor model. As a means to sustain the mentor program, the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Studies at the University of Manitoba now offers a three-credit-hour Diverse Populations Mentorship experiential learning course for undergraduate students who are interested in working with Aboriginal high school students in the mentor programs. Finally, five members of our university undergraduate student research team (two Aboriginal, two non-Aboriginal allies, and one racialized minority) have been hired as teachers in the school divisions where mentorship programs have been offered.

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