

"Keep Us Coming Back for More": Urban Aboriginal Youth Speak About Wholistic Education

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This article is drawn from a community-based research study that explores the opportunities and challenges of wholistic educational practices provided by non-profit Aboriginal youth organizations located in Vancouver, British Columbia. Through a sharing circle and open-ended interviews with youth and an Elder from these organizations, I sought to understand the role of Indigenous knowledge and effective practices that support youth who utilize programs within these organizations. Our conversations reveal that urban Aboriginal youth are finding new ways to explore their Indigeneity and cultural traditions. The youth describe how Aboriginal youth organizations are meeting their needs for a wholistic education, resulting in future directions for program planning and development of Aboriginal youth organizations.

Introduction

Leo and I are sitting on a red velvet couch in the centre of a brightly lit computer room in a native youth organization in East Vancouver. A large round Ikea® rug resembling the earth lays underneath our feet, providing the room with a sense of symmetry and balance. Behind us, several youth are coming and going out of the learning centre, while asking the staff various questions about how to complete their résumés and job applications. In the midst of the quiet buzz, Leo sits and quietly chats with me as he reaches for his twentieth Two-Bite Brownie®¹. A self-described trickster, I have come to know Leo for his great sense of humour and easy candour in our conversations together. For the better part of the interview, Leo asks me a host of questions pertaining to Indigenous knowledge and seems very interested to share hunting stories. We are near the end of our conversation when I suddenly think to ask him, "How do you think your friends feel about coming to places like this?"

Leo responds in a surprisingly serious tone for once: "I am sure they enjoy it. They keep coming back." Leo was the first youth to signal the importance of having youth return to Aboriginal youth organizations to learn more about their Aboriginal cultures and knowledge. However, this phrase has become a continuous thread in my conversations with all the youth in this study.

This article examines the wholistic education² provided by urban Aboriginal youth organizations, from the perspective of eight youth interviewed. The youth affirm that Aboriginal youth organizations are meeting their needs for a wholistic approach to services and programming. This is evident in the statement "I keep coming back" made by several of the youth taking part in this study. "Keep them coming back for more" reinforces

the value and necessity of remaining active in Aboriginal youth organizations, to allow youth to maintain reciprocal teaching and learning relationships with staff, Elders, and their peers. This phrase can also be understood to be part of an incremental Aboriginal pedagogical approach wherein the teacher shares only a certain amount of information with learners in order to pique their curiosity and motivate them to return and learn more (Archibald, 2008).

I examine Aboriginal youth experiences within the larger context of mainstream society and the urban environment in order to highlight the role that current and historical structural policies have played in the lives of Aboriginal youth. I then trace and critique the 'positive' youth development movement, while advocating for the need of individuals, organizations, and governments working with Aboriginal youth to shift to an Indigenous wholistic approach to child and youth development. In the second part of this article, I identify the Aboriginal organizations that youth in this study have accessed and the programs and activities that help to connect them to Indigenous knowledge and culture(s); I also briefly compare these organizations to their schooling experiences. In the final part of the article, the youth share their hopes, dreams, and visions for Aboriginal youth organizations by identifying future directions for program planning and development.

Urban Aboriginal Youth and Education

Many of the studies, policy documents, commissions, and reports which have been published about Aboriginal education state that some progress has been made in some areas, and yet efforts to improve Aboriginal education remain limited by ongoing obstacles and challenges (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2007; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). These challenges are particularly significant for urban Aboriginal youth in Vancouver who have a graduation success rate of 39 percent (as compared to 71 percent for non-Aboriginal students) and who are the youngest and fastest growing population in Canada (B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2005); of 40, 310 Aboriginal people living Vancouver, 60% of this population is under 25 years of age (Statistics Canada, 2005). Research conducted on urban Aboriginal education projects is primarily focused on the mainstream education system and does not investigate the role that Aboriginal youth organizations play in meeting the social, emotional, physical, and cultural needs of Aboriginal youth. These organizations, however, have assumed an important role in the overall education of Indigenous youth, aiming to compensate for the lack of wholistic education provided by schools (Centre for Native Policy and Research, 2006). For example, the Urban Native Youth Association in Vancouver provides services to 5,000 Aboriginal youth, many of whom were not in school (Urban Native Youth Association, 2006). The

high level of youth participation indicates that these organizations provide services and an environment that Aboriginal youth value and find relevant.

There is an increasing presence of Aboriginal people in urban areas, with nearly 54% of all Canadian Aboriginal peoples living in cities, and there is no indication that this will decrease in coming years (Government of Canada, 2008). These Aboriginal people are a diverse group who inhabit cities for a variety of social and economic reasons, including the need for education, employment, housing, and healthcare (Lawrence, 2004; Peters, 2007; The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Despite the varying circumstances which characterize urban Aboriginal peoples' lives, many scholars have noted how historical, structural, and institutional inequalities, stemming from Canada's colonial and imperialist policies, have contributed to urban Aboriginal peoples' contemporary reality (Battiste, 2000b; Lawrence, 2005; Mercredi, 2000; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001), which includes poverty, incarceration, cultural dislocation, intergenerational trauma, racism, and inappropriate curricula. Many of these historical and contemporary policies have and continue to be firmly rooted in deficit thinking and pathologizing discourses and practices. Pathologizing discourses have a tendency to "other" First Nations people and regard them as being racially and culturally inferior to Western standards. These discourses are then translated into hegemonic practices, articulated through policies, and lead to further oppression due to the structural constraints placed on Aboriginal youth's collective self-development (Young, 1990).

As a result of this increasing presence, an unprecedented number of Aboriginal youth and their families are using organizations and services in urban areas. However, funding levels have not been increased to meet this growing demand. The National Association of Friendship Centres (2008, p. 4) states "the federal government's refusal to adequately address the needs and opportunities of a growing urban population has placed inordinate strains on Aboriginal peoples, their communities, and institutions".

At the same time, Aboriginal and community organizations are administering educational programs and services that are of significant value to Aboriginal youth because they provide resources that are considered culturally appropriate, offer a wide range of wholistic programming (i.e., sports and recreation services, support services, and spiritual guidance), and are not limited to institutionalized Eurocentric educational curriculum and practices. Organizations such as the Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA) and the Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association (KAYA) in Vancouver provide a comprehensive array of innovative programming that incorporates traditional Aboriginal cultural components to meet the needs of urban Aboriginal youth. Such programming includes advocacy, education programs, sports and recreation programs, arts and culture programs, youth summer programs, and residential recovery homes. Similar organizations can be found in major urban cities across Canada. The Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and the Centre for Native Policy and Research (2005) have identified a need for research regarding the strengths and challenges of urban Aboriginal youth organizations. However, few studies have responded to this need or have included urban Aboriginal youth attitudes and perceptions of formal or community-based education (Blair, 2001; Gilchrist, 1995; Riecken, Tanaka, & Scott, 2006; Ward & Bouvier, 2001).

In British Columbia, there is a growing agency among Aboriginal youth who are personally and collectively providing strategies on how to improve legislation, policy, initiatives, programs, and services for themselves (KAYA, 2009). For example, the Unified Aboriginal Youth Collective (UAYC) hosted a forum in 2009 and produced the document "Our Culture, Language and Education": A United Aboriginal Youth Collective Action Plan (2009). Within the action plan, Aboriginal youth gave direction to local, regional, and provincial governments and to Aboriginal organizations by highlighting specific gaps in the areas of culture and education that need to be addressed. To this end, many of the youth within the UAYC have been very proactive and have taken a great deal of personal responsibility and initiative to assist governments and Aboriginal organizations to successfully implement the action items outlined in their report.

The agency of Aboriginal youth is not limited to the political realm. Many Aboriginal youth are also finding new ways to connect with their Indigeneity and to explore their cultural traditions through a variety of mediums: graffiti, hip hop, beat boxes, video, digital media, live mix video, theatre, spoken word, and art installations (Reece, 2009; Williard, 2009). According to Glenn Alteen, producer of the website BeatNation.org (2009), "There is a strong sense of activism present in the [youth's] work." Skeena Reece and Tania Williard, curators for BeatNation.org, both note how hip hop has served as a form of activism and a driving force for youth to express themselves and engage in their culture(s) in new ways. They proclaim hip hop to be an important vehicle, allowing Aboriginal youth to bring important social and political issues to light. Given that many urban Aboriginal youth are involved in efforts to affect positive changes in their communities, research needs to include them, acknowledge their efforts, and promote positive conceptions.

Positive Youth Development

Since the 1990s, the *positive youth development* movement in Canada and the United States has been advanced by health promotion professionals, educators, academics, and policy makers who seek alternatives to youth policies and practices largely based on problem reduction (Jaffe, 1997; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Mahoney & Lafferty, 2003). *Positive youth development* is a broad term that can be confusing because it is used in many different ways to describe a number of related items. Benson and

Johnson (2001, p. 3) state that *positive youth development* is a wide-ranging term that "simultaneously denote[s] a call to action, a mobilization of people and places, a body of knowledge, a set of organizations, a philosophy, and a life stage". As a result of the term's comprehensiveness, it may be easier to describe positive youth development according to four main interrelated themes: (1) a philosophical approach; (2) a developmental stage; (3) practice in the field of youth work; and (4) emerging policies in the literature. I will briefly define the four interrelated themes found in the positive youth development literature. However, it is not my intention to describe them in great detail. Instead, I would like to examine some of the implicit challenges inherent in this approach and point to the need for individuals and organizations working with Aboriginal youth to develop a more integrated understanding of youth wellbeing that is critically oriented and that encompasses an Indigenous wholistic perspective.

Philosophical Approach:

As a philosophy, positive youth development encompasses a set of principles which emphasizes the need for individuals, organizations, and institutions to nurture the growth capacity of young people while they go through the 'natural' stages of life, especially at the community level. One of the best known (and most extensive) frameworks for this philosophical approach was developed by the Search Institute, which identified 40 assets (internal and external) that constitute a foundation for healthy development to apply to all young people. Many schools and community organizations in Canada and the US have drawn upon the Search Institute's asset model to inform program planning in both countries (Search Institute, 2009).

Developmental Stage:

Within the field of developmental psychology, youth development is most often understood, in the most basic sense, as a 'natural' process that is attuned to the basic needs and stages of an adolescent's development (Benson & Johnson, 2001; Dean, Harpe, Lee, Loiselle, & Mallet, 2008; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). Youth development encompasses a set of principles that emphasize the need for individuals, organizations, and institutions to nurture the growth capacity of young people while they go through the 'natural' stages of life (from infancy to childhood to adolescence and into adulthood).

Practice in the Field of Youth Work:

A significant portion of the literature describes a range of positive youth development practices in schools, community centres, and youth organizations (Deschenes, McDonald, & McLaughlin, 2004; Ream & Witt, 2004; Ziegler, 2004). *Positive youth development* in this sense refers to the application of the pertinent principles to a planned set of practices that fosters a

youth's development. For example, researchers and practitioners in schools have applied the principles to after-school programs and structured activities (Vandell, Pierce, & Dadisman, 2005; Fraser, Cote, & Deacon, 2005). Most Aboriginal youth organizations or those organizations that host Aboriginal youth programs must also adhere to these practices if they receive federal and provincial government funding.

Policy:

Positive youth development has also gained prominence as a political movement, which has unified a wide range of discussions and actions in aiming to shape policy as well as practice (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Benson & Johnson, 2001). However, as Jaffe (1997) notes, the full-scale adoption of a framework based on positive youth development is impeded by significant institutional challenges. Policy makers involved in government youth programming have adopted the model to a certain degree; however, there is an increasing reliance on 'evidence-based approaches' which emphasize risk-oriented pathologies rather than positive constructions of youth (Clegg, 2005).

Challenges of Positive Youth Development

At a surface level, one may wonder why it is problematic to view youth within this framework. While the positive youth development movement certainly attempts to describe youth more positively, a significant portion of the literature continues to employ pathologizing labels to describe youth (i.e., "at risk", "marginalized", "vulnerable populations"). These labels focus negatively on the deficits of youth and their families as the central problem for school and social "failure" rather than examining the structural and institutional inequalities that construct their lives.³ The difference between a deficit orientation and a positive youth development approach is that the latter combines 'risk factors' with protective factors to evaluate the circumstances of a youth's life.⁴ In this sense, positive concepts such as "protective factors" should be regarded with a measure of caution because they individualize social problems rather than looking at them as being a product of broader social, educational, economic, and political structures.

It is also necessary to question the assumptions implicit in the positive youth development approach. Lesko (2001) argues that 'adolescence' is a historically-constructed term that continues to be shaped and powerfully defined by modern scientific discourses (particularly by those in the field of developmental psychology). Other assumptions include the notions that youth "coming of age" have "raging hormones", are "peer orientated", and develop in line with a natural aging process (Lesko, 2001, pp. 2-5).

A particularly salient aspect of Lesko's (2001) research underscores the historical development of the term 'adolescence' and exposes how Western notions of progress and biological determinism continue to affect current

thinking about youth. Lesko infers that our way of viewing adolescents has been influenced by imperialism, masculinity, and racism. However, this influence is obscured by the positive youth development framework because it construes adolescent development to be a natural biological process which is not affected by social and cultural influences. Nonetheless, whiteness, masculinity, and domination continue to inform concepts and frameworks of youth development. This critique is highly pertinent to First Nations youth because most policy makers and mainstream educators expect First Nations youth to 'transition' into adulthood in a way that is class-, gender-, and race-free (as is the norm for White middle-class male youth). Lesko (p. 8) argues that most accounts "do not consider modern adolescence in relation to broad cultural transformations of time, race, gender and citizenship". Clearly, the positive youth development framework does not address the negative impacts of colonization on Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal youth are placed within its universalizing framework that positions their 'social' and 'economic disadvantages' to the rest of Canadian society while negating their political power (Baskin, 2007).

Within the realm of the youth services field, many academics, policy makers, and community organizations have voiced the need for government and educational policies to shift from a deficit-orientation towards constructing a more positive approach to child and youth well-being (Brendtro et al., 1990; Mahoney & Lafferty, 2003; The McCreary Centre, 2002 & 2005). The emergence of new and positive approaches to child and youth development is understood to provide an alternative to the pathological discourses that characterize the deficit orientation. This would include a wholistic framework to understand child and youth development, as well as a systemic analysis that considers the impacts of colonization on youth and their families, and emphasizes their inherent cultural strengths.

A Wholistic Understanding of Child and Youth Development

An Indigenous wholistic perspective on child and youth development is an example of an alter-Native approach which can be employed to pursue institutional change for First Nations youth. Wholism is understood to encompass the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional aspects of an individual, one's family, and one's community. Wholistic education is rooted firmly in Aboriginal languages and relationships to the land, cultures, and the oral tradition. Knowledge is transmitted to the learner through mentorship, stories, narratives, songs, dances, and ceremonial activities (Archibald, 2008). It is understood to be part of a lifelong experiential process which simultaneously engages and develops all aspects of the individual and the collective (Archibald, 2008; Nicol, Archibald, Kelleher, & Brown, 2006). In this sense, individual learning is viewed as one part of a collective that extends beyond the family, community, and Nation to Creation itself (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). The Canadian Council

on Learning (2007, p. 6) illustrates how the Medicine wheel (used by the Blackfoot, Cree, Dakota, and others) "presents learning as [a] life long process connected to stages of human development, beginning before birth and continuing through childhood to old age". This understanding of human development is important because it conveys the circular structure that is embedded in all Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and it allows us to see how wisdom and knowledge were imparted to individuals throughout a lifetime. In traditional times, teaching and knowledge transmission was, to a large degree, the province of Elders, who were significant sources of knowledge, that of which was passed on to younger generations. These teachings were primarily conveyed through oral histories and stories, many still being shared with young people today.

Today, many Aboriginal communities and organizations employ a wholistic approach to child and youth development, focusing on traditional understandings of interconnectedness and wholeness, to address the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of youth, their family, and their community. To date, however, only a small body of research in this area exists and no research has been conducted on wholistic education provided by Aboriginal youth organizations.

Indigenous Research Methodologies

Research plays a pivotal role in the decolonization of Indigenous peoples. Research methods and methodologies, the theories that inform them, the questions that they generate, and the presentation styles that they employ require careful and critical consideration. As Smith (1999, p. 39) states, "We must [centre] our concerns and world views and then come to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes". In my research, I employed wholistic qualitative research methods because it leaves room for 'insider' perspectives, or the subjective voices, relationships, and experiences which are pivotal dimensions of Indigenous perspectives and approaches. The concept of wholism is a particularly consistent thread in the fabric of most Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies. In a research context, this speaks to the need for Aboriginal researchers to employ an integrative approach, addressing human relations and practices within Aboriginal social, spiritual, and physical ecology. It was my intention to emphasize the commonalities among urban Aboriginal communities' understanding of wholism in creating a framework that relays the interconnection between Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous methodologies.

A qualitative wholistic framework, guided by a community Elder, was chosen for this study because these methods provided culturally appropriate elements congruent with an Indigenous methodology. Elder Jerry Adams, from the Nisga'a Nation, helped me navigate between the personal and collective voice, and to determine how to work within an urban

context in a respectful way that unites our commonalities. The methods used included a sharing circle workshop and open-ended individual and paired interviews; these are most relevant to the oral tradition and community interactions that occur in most Aboriginal community-based settings. These methods also ensured that research participants could share information about their lives in a comfortable setting and in a way that was respectful of their contributions.

Research Site

I partnered with the Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA) and the Aboriginal Community Policing Centre (ACPC). I was able to access youth from ACPC's programs and a partner program, Creating Healthy Aboriginal Role Models Program (CHARM), at another site. Through UNYA's partnership with the Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC), I also was able to access and promote my research to youth at both these organizations. UNYA also provided me with access to a meeting room to host the sharing circle workshop and conduct individual interviews with youth. I chose these organizations because they have several Aboriginal youth-related programs that provide programming to high populations of youth across East Vancouver. I believed that accessing youth from these organizations would provide a diverse sample of youth who represented a various range of personal interests, levels of education and cultural knowledge, gender, sexual orientation, and engagement with Aboriginal community programs. I also had established relationships with staff from these organizations, as a result of my prior work and personal experiences. To this end, I continually met with administrative staff, youth workers, and volunteers from these organizations to ensure that my research design, methods, analysis, and findings reflected a wholistic approach.

Participant Selection

I hosted four information sessions during a program at each organization. At each of these sessions, I aimed to participate in their respective programs to become better acquainted with the youth and to establish relationships before approaching youth for the study⁵. At each of the information sessions I hosted, I shared information about the project, answered any questions from the youth, and highlighted pertinent ethical information to them. Eight youth took part in the study: six male and two female youth between the ages of 16 to 24 years. These eight youth took part in the sharing circle and six of these eight youth also took part in open-ended interviews.

Sharing Circle

I first conducted a pilot sharing circle workshop using a structured experience model, as outlined by Charters-Voght (1999, p. 65), wherein she states that a structured experience workshop allows the "participant to discover for

himself [& herself] the learning being offered by the experiential process". Taking part were seven Aboriginal youth workers and a manager from one of the partner organizations. I incorporated their feedback from the pilot session to prepare a sharing circle workshop template. I then co-facilitated a workshop with Elder Jerry Adams and with eight Aboriginal youth taking part.

I chose to combine a sharing circle with a structured experience model for the workshop because I believed the methods to be complementary and based on experiential and shared learning, conveying key principles of Aboriginal pedagogy (Battiste, 2002a). Further, it allowed the youth to determine and validate their own learning from their participation in various activities throughout the session. It also allowed me to create a safer space to develop a shared discursive sphere, where the youth could learn from each other new ideas and broaden their understanding of wholism and Indigenous knowledge. I hoped that this practical approach would increase the youth's ownership to the process. A sharing circle is congruent with traditional protocols in the Indigenous community, where "the term sharing captures the essence of both talking and listening, which is crucial" in any Indigenous research method (Bazluk, 2002, p. 136). As a process, it is premised on mutual sharing, listening, and 'feeling with' others as individuals form reciprocal relationships and learn new knowledge about the living world.

Interviews

I hosted a pilot interview with an Aboriginal youth worker who had also participated in the pilot sharing circle workshop that I had previously conducted, to refine my interview skills and learn how to draw meaning from the stories that she shared with me.⁶ Next, I conducted open-ended interviews with six of the eight youth who had participated in the sharing circle workshop. Finally, I interviewed Elder Jerry Adams in order to inquire about his understanding of Indigenous knowledge and wholism, and to listen to his reflections from the sharing circle workshop.

Each interview was intended to engage and build on the same principles of wholism and Indigenous knowledge that were introduced and emphasized in the sharing circle workshop.⁷ The interviews were also designed to determine what the youth already knew and what they had learned from the workshop. Interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to 1.5 hours. All interviews were recorded on an audio digital recorder and then later transcribed.

"Keep Us Coming Back for More": Youth Participation in Programs

Youth in this study spoke about their participation in urban Aboriginal youth organizations. Conversations with them reveal how they became involved with youth programs, what a wholistic program provides for

them, suggestions for programs to build on their good work, and future directions to support urban Aboriginal youth.

Youth I spoke with indicated that they became involved in Aboriginal youth organizations to help them maintain balance in their lives by meeting new friends; learning more about Indigenous knowledge and cultures(s); participating in sports and recreational activities; and connecting with healthy individuals in a safe and comfortable environment. One participant, Cloudy Days, explained that he didn't have a precise reason initially for attending an Aboriginal youth program offered by UNYA: "I can't really think for a real answer, 'cause this one day, I had nothing to do and I asked a friend of mine 'what is a good place to go and hang out?'" However, once introduced to UNYA, he said, "Ever since then, I don't think they can't get rid of me!"

Leo told me that he attended Aboriginal youth programs because he enjoyed having a place to go and meet friends in a relaxing and comfortable environment. Referring to one of the larger Aboriginal youth organizations, Courtenay said, "I like how the youth workers there, they really try to give a lot of attention to us. If you want to have some one-to-one to just talk about the day, they will do that."

When I asked the youth about the differences or similarities between school and Aboriginal youth organizations, many made negative comments about their schooling experience.⁸ For example, one youth shared a lengthy story about the constant prejudice and racism that was inflicted on him by his peers and the school administrator. As a result, he was unable to graduate. Nevertheless, most of the youth believed that pursuing a higher education would be invaluable to their personal wellbeing and success.

All of the youth agreed that Aboriginal youth organizations provided positive safe spaces where they could gather and meet new friends. They stated that many of the programs in these organizations promoted an Aboriginal pedagogy that allowed them to participate in experiential activities and connect to Aboriginal culture(s).

Wholistic Approaches to Programs

The youth concurred that Aboriginal youth organizations were providing them with educational opportunities that taught them how to live in harmony with others, their community, nature, and the spirit world. Tyrone indicated that Aboriginal youth organizations were doing a "pretty good job" in this regard. Dimicia highlighted how the organization she participated in was meeting the youth's wholistic needs through a range of activities:

I do think that they are meeting the youth's needs wholistically...they have sports and recreation outings. They have Elders. They take the youth to sweat lodges even just to hang out, just to talk. I think [PAUSE] Let me think! I think as service providers they are offering everything that they possibly can.

Ben stated that Aboriginal youth organizations gave him a strong emotional foundation by providing a safe space where he could establish and strengthen relationships with other youth and staff: "Everybody is heard in a sense. There is a gathering, just being a group together with. Just all the visiting. Even in drum group, we will just sit there and joke. There is a lot of good connection."

Like Ben, Leo was very optimistic about the possibilities of connecting and interacting with peers who helped him to gain a holistic understanding and appreciation of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and heritages in Canada: "We are all different clans and different tribes and we know what we grew up with and what we share between each other." Leo further explained that he believed this cultural diversity was a benefit for him, in that he was able to learn about multiple Aboriginal cultures and traditions from friends, youth workers, and Elders he met through Aboriginal youth organizations.

Finally, Courtenay made a particularly vivid remark, signifying the personal transformation that can occur when youth participate in wholistic cultural activities provided by Aboriginal youth organizations: "My friend said that ever since canoe journey she could trust people more and realized that not everyone was a bad person and stuff like that." Courtenay also noted that wholistic education enabled her to connect with an Elder who helped her to understand the strength and power of Indigenous peoples' survival:

Yeah, it does. You just know it in your heart. You just know it in your heart and it takes a while to register in your brain. A friend of mine, his name is Jerry, and he is like this Elder guy. He said that as Aboriginal people have a lot of love and that is why we are still around, even though we have been put down for so many years. Even though people have been trying to kill us off with genocide and stuff. The only reason why we are still around is because it is in our DNA to love.

She told me that this emotional teaching supports her when she ventures into various parts of the city in the course of her daily life. Exploring her identity as an Aboriginal youth thus allows her to flourish as an individual in her community in various ways.

Courtenay's comments about love are illuminated by Holmes (2000) who refers to this knowledge as "heart knowledge" and "blood memory". This suggests that when Courtney says "it is in our DNA to love", she means that Indigenous knowledge is transmitted through the heart of the listener to become memories which flow through blood lines and foster relational connections (Archibald, 2008). Love as an emotional teaching is thus a key aspect of the Indigenous knowledge that is imparted through the wholistic education delivered by these organizations.

Building Programs to Support Wholistic Education

Even though the youth unanimously agreed that Aboriginal youth organizations provide them with a sound wholistic education, they offered suggestions about how their wholistic learning could be improved. I have intentionally withheld their names in this section in order to respect their privacy and to ensure that I do not jeopardize their access to programs and services in the future.

One youth believed that Aboriginal youth organizations could promote the programs and activities they offered more effectively. His experience was that he often didn't find out about a program or event until after it was over or had already started. He also suggested that child minding was a significant concern for single parents (especially young women) and that its absence could be a potential barrier to participation in youth programs.

Another youth accentuated the need for Aboriginal youth organizations to provide more education, awareness, and support about issues related to two-spirited youth⁹. She explains:

I think it is extremely important for us to have more education around the history of two-spirit people. In our schools, in our organizations you know? With our youth we have the highest rate of suicide. For queer youth it is second. What if you are both?

When I asked her how Aboriginal youth organizations could meet the needs of two-spirited people, she also touched on the need for these organizations to integrate other social justice issues into the design of programs and activities:

I think maybe it needs to be talked about more. Just more awareness in the community, so that other youth feel more comfortable or educated about it as well. It is easy to put a sign on the door that says "this space is queer friendly" or "no homophobia" or "no racism or sexism" but all these kinds of things need to be talked about more.

Another youth indicated that the organizations need to balance anti-racist education with Aboriginal cultural teachings. He stated:

I guess that is one thing that that can be improved. Going back to the improvement of Aboriginal programs I guess that would be giving them [the youth] the knowledge that while teaching them the same time that our culture, how our people lived and stuff. Also giving them the knowledge of the times and how multicultural it is and how they can't stereotype just because we have been stereotyped.

These comments support arguments presented in the literature (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000). In particular, wholistic education must engage more critical thought in order to allow youth to examine the historical and contemporary institutional and social practices that exclude them. This education should explore how Indigenous people's exclusion intersects and interlocks with multiple forms of oppression, particularly with regard to two-spirited issues, anti-racist education, and women's issues (Green, 2007; Graveline, 1998; Young, 1990).

Addressing the issues that these youth mentioned would greatly enhance the wholistic programming and services that Aboriginal youth organizations deliver. Comments by these youth also suggested that these issues need to be addressed in multiple ways and point to a need for schools and organizations to work together in order to facilitate a better understanding of two-spirited and other social justice issues.

Future Directions

All of the youth gave me a surprised look and then laughed or raised their eyebrows when I asked the following questions: "If you could run your own organization, what kinds of programs or activities would you have in it?" "Who would you hire?" "How would you run it?" However, after their initial reactions, they generated a 'feast of ideas' about their dream Aboriginal youth organization (Archibald, 2008). Leo told me that he would have to get the Elders' advice on how to run his organization before deciding what kinds of programs or activities to offer but had many ideas in mind:

I would probably just ask the Elders what to do for the youth, or for anyone that wants to participate. For what kinds of activities, I would try to teach the youth (or anybody that wants to learn) how: to make a sweat, or how to do a smudge, pipe ceremonies, or how to skin a moose for their hide...how to make a drum, and archery practice.

Tyrone's organization would provide sports and recreational activities, computer programs, cultural activities, the mentorship of Elders, and a community kitchen in the city. He would also organize opportunities for youth to leave the city and participate in traditional food and medicine gathering activities. He states:

I would definitely have a gym for youth to go play floor hockey, basketball. Probably close to a park so we could go play baseball or have a BBQ. Computer programs because I know a lot of people are getting into computers now. I would probably have an Elder or someone work with storytelling or sweat lodges, different ceremonies. Medicine. Like herbal medicines. Probably, like a small place as big as the gym across the street for drumming and singing. Maybe like a small area like this for child minding because I know there are a lot of Aboriginal ladies out there that are single moms or single parents I guess. What else? A place like this for foosball or pool, ping pong or whatever. Community kitchen. I would like to do that. I would like to do that with someone who likes to cook wild food and smoke it or makes jerky or something.

Courtenay told me she would hire older Aboriginal youth to work for her organization because they could easily identify with some of the issues that younger youth were facing. She explains:

I think they would do a lot of good because maybe when they were younger they were going through some troubles. Or problems or family issues or whatever it is. Now that they are older and may be aged out, they would find lots of fulfillment as people who are in the same situation.

Courtenay believed that many Aboriginal youth organizations were already providing excellent services and was mindful to not want to dupli-

cate existing services. She believed that organizations could enhance or expand their traditional arts and language programming, so she envisioned her pretend organization as focusing on these subjects.

Ben was excited about the possibility of running his organization. He stated "Right away my brain fills up so it is hard to filter!" After having some time to 'filter' his thoughts, Ben provided me with a very wholistic and comprehensive array of programming that his Aboriginal youth organization would offer:

All the culture teachings like smudge, sweats, canoe journeys, canoe racing, wool weaving, cedar weaving, basket weaving. I'd have parenting programs, as well as youth groups, talking circles (co-ed and male/female ones). Individualized attention, one on one...I think I would have trips to, probably like an annual trip to somewhere like Haida Gwaii to go and see the old long houses, and have a pow wow. You have to make it modern as well. You have to have modern programs. I guess hip hop classes and all sorts of sports. I definitely have guest speakers and workshops, mostly Elders. Then have professional guest speakers like CFOs.

In addition, Ben believed that there was a great need for Aboriginal youth to create contemporary oral histories and stories. His organization would strive to meet this need and would also offer language classes, traditional food cooking classes, and a storytelling program.

It was exciting to witness the inspiration that this question evoked in the youth. Their visions converge to highlight the need for Aboriginal youth organizations to balance land, language, and cultural teachings with contemporary education and the support of youth workers, Elders, and peers. At the same time, they all shared a desire to learn their traditional languages and an appreciation of their cultural practices.

Discussion

The stories shared with me by the youth I met on this research journey illuminate the strength that resides within each them and the important ways in which Aboriginal youth organizations are nurturing their wholistic development. The youth highlighted the crucial support they receive from these organizations and identified a diverse range of educational, cultural, recreational, and social activities that mattered to them. Further, the youth have demonstrated that the wholistic education delivered by these organizations not only enhances their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being (and promises to continue doing so throughout their lives), but also helps them to build stronger connections with their families, communities, and Nations. To this end, Aboriginal youth organizations promote wholeness and balance to help youth understand who they are, where they come from, and what their cultural heritages can teach them about their present realities. This focus on identity emphasizes that wholistic well-being for youth must also be cultivated within a culturally relevant context. In general, developing positive understandings of youth's identity enhances the appreciation of their cultures, provides knowledge about the historical injustices that affect them, strengthens their sense of belonging

to their communities, and encourages them to pass these teachings on to new generations of youth. It is therefore imperative for Aboriginal youth organizations to continue offering wholistic knowledge through programming and service provision.

This study confirms findings in the literature that demonstrate the importance of intergenerational relationships as means to create healthy Aboriginal communities (Archibald, 2008; Carpenter et al., 2008; Gray, 2010; Young, 2007). All of the participants noted how profoundly youth workers, Elders, and older youth had inspired them. This speaks to youths' need to have mentors and peers to nurture their spirit, support them in their day-to-day lives, and encourage them to realize their goals.

The youth also provided important suggestions as to how Aboriginal youth organizations can enhance the programs and services provided. Youth feedback suggests that organizations could consider expanding their wholistic programming through offerings such as child-minding services and continuing to incorporate intergenerational or family-oriented activities into programs in order to strengthen relationship ties between Elders, parents, and youth. Youth also identified a need for organizations to continue stimulating critical thinking by highlighting anti-racist, two-spirited, and women's issues. This is particularly salient as it directly supports recommendations given in the literature (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000; Graveline, 1998; Green, 2007; Silver et al., 2006; St. Denis, 2007). For example, Silver et al. (2006) stress the importance of teaching the history of oppression to affected groups. Enabling youth to understand the history of Indigenous people's oppression and to explore other social justice issues will support the processes of transformation, decolonization, and healing (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Green, 2007; Graveline, 1999; Laenui, 2000; Smith, 1999; Smith, 2003 & 2005).

Youth also voiced a need for multiple social supports. Aboriginal youth organizations should be seen as only one strand of an important web of supports that youth have access to. Research is needed to determine the best way to strengthen processes that involve joint planning, resource sharing, and decision making with educational and political institutions so youth may have access to a seamless web of program and supports.

Reflections on youth experiences suggest wholistic approaches to well-being can inform and take precedence over mainstream models of positive youth development. The fundamental difference between wholistic approaches and positive youth development reveal the need to move away from an understanding of health and well-being that is solely based on a youth's individual characteristics. The latter approach pays little attention to the powerful social forces and structural conditions that have shaped Aboriginal communities and impacted youths' lived experiences. As a result, it fails to provide the critical historical perspective that is essential

to the empowerment of Aboriginal youth, their families, and their communities. It is therefore important for researchers, policy-makers, and programmers concerned with the livelihood of Aboriginal youth to do more than develop definitions of disadvantage. This will enable Aboriginal youth initiatives to employ a perspective that acknowledges the complexities of youths' lives in a meaningful way and strengthens, rather than pathologizes, youth and their families.

Lastly, to ensure that Indigenous wholistic philosophies of child and youth well-being are taken seriously, Aboriginal programs need to be critically evaluated by Aboriginal communities and by those who take part in programs within the cultural context. Practices and approaches that are not sound or effective should be identified and modified or changed. Accordingly, ongoing research is required to illuminate how urban Aboriginal youth organizations can provide a diversity of Aboriginal cultural teachings and language instruction in order to meet the needs of youth from various Nations.

Conclusion

This paper provides new ways to think about wholistic educational programs that support urban Aboriginal youth, suggesting that the interests of youth would be served best by policies and practices that build on their perspectives, strengths, and historical and contemporary realities. As a result, many academics, community organizations, and Indigenous allies have called for an 'alter-Native' approach to Aboriginal services. This approach is critical to Aboriginal youth organizations and to those organizations that serve Aboriginal youth, as it has the potential to redress many structural and institutional inequalities. I have argued that it is necessary for educators, practitioners, and policy makers who serve the urban Aboriginal population to incorporate a wholistic understanding of child and youth development, as well as a systemic analysis that does not focus entirely on individual problems or deficits.

The youth perspectives in this wholistic education study offer Aboriginal youth organizations direction for enhancing their programs in ways that appeal to youth and their needs. Aboriginal youth organizations cannot be expected to ameliorate all of the challenges which Aboriginal communities face today, particularly the systemic discrimination and social conditions that have evolved over one hundred and fifty years of colonization. Nevertheless, the interviews of these youth confirm that Aboriginal youth organizations are providing them with exceptional wholistic approaches to education, especially given the funding constraints that they must work within (Clegg, 2005).

'Keep them coming back for more' was a consistent theme that emerged in the interviews. It highlighted the importance that youth place on remaining connected with these organizations, to receive guidance and

mentorship as they continue on their pathways to learn more about wholism, so they may live healthy, balanced lives.

Youth enthusiasm about wholistic education and their firm belief in its transformative capacity are inspirational, and transmit a message of hope for the future generations of urban Aboriginal youth and their communities.

Notes

¹ HomestyleTwo-Bite Brownies® are a popular brand of brownies sold in grocery stores.

² It is salient to note that the term *wholism* has multiple functions in this article. It is a component of my methodology, a central tenet of Indigenous knowledge (IK), an educational model, and a foundational concept. The relationship between wholism and IK also merits comment. As both terms are fluid and metaphorical in nature, they sit uneasily with the linear Western style of academic enquiry and evade being neatly fit into precise, separate categories (Nakata, 2007). They can be seen as having a twinned or complimentary relationship. Finally, each Indigenous group has developed its own cultural content for wholism that is grounded in the specific meanings, traditions, place, customs, and relationships which define it. However, Archibald (2008, p. 11) suggests that despite the differences in content "a common goal of wholism has been to attain a mutual balance and harmony among animals, people, elements of nature and the spirit world. To attain this goal, ways of acquiring knowledge are essential and embedded in cultural practices". Many Aboriginal organizations can be understood to play a role in highlighting these cultural practices to youth through the delivery of educational programs and services.

³ According to Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001), the definition and measurement of "at risk" varies considerably from one context to another, although in most cases it is a broad term which has mixed implications for the children and youth it affects, namely those who are of Aboriginal ancestry and minority groups (p. 328).

⁴ According to The McCreery Institute (2005), protective factors are defined as those factors which healthy youth development requires, and include: "caring relationships with adults, positive expectations for growth, and opportunities to develop competencies in school and community life" (p. 15).

⁵ For example, at CHARM I participated in their evening sharing circle and played ping-pong with the youth; at the BYRC, I assisted with making breakfast; and at UNYA, I visited with the youth and youth workers at the centre on several occasions.

⁶ While I cannot name this youth worker, I would like to extend my deep appreciation to her for the time she shared with me. She not only participated in this pilot interview on her only day off, but also traveled a significant distance across the city to meet with me.

⁷ For example, a concern was raised by a colleague about the 'validity' of hosting a workshop on Indigenous knowledge (IK) and then asking youth what their thoughts and feelings were about it in subsequent interviews. Two interview questions were specifically designed to learn what the youth gained from the sharing circle workshop regarding the concepts of wholism and IK. This helped me to integrate the youth's prior knowledge of these terms in my analysis.

⁸ Two youth were attending post-secondary institutions, two youth were working, and one was unemployed. For the youth who were not in school, I asked them to reflect back on their schooling experiences.

⁹ According to two spirits.com, a non-profit organization, the meaning of 'two spirit' is traced to ancient teachings that are found in many First Nations cultures. The website states, "Our Elders tell us of people who were gifted among all beings because they carried two spirits: that of male and female. It is told that women engaged in tribal warfare and married other women as there were men who married other men. These individuals were looked upon as a third gender in many cases and in almost all cultures they were honoured and revered. 2 Spirit people were often the visionaries, the healers and the medicine people...Not all Indigenous peoples identify with this term. Today, some Aboriginal people who are two-spirited also identify as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-gendered, or queer."

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Supporting Indigenous Students through a Culturally Relevant Assessment Model Based on the Medicine Wheel

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We describe the development of a student assessment model based on the medicine wheel for implementation in the Child Welfare course (FCC 240) as part of the Family and Community Counselling Program at the Native Education College (NEC), a private Aboriginal post-secondary institution in Vancouver, BC. We discuss the process of developing the model from our own social locations: Roselynn is a female Caucasian instructor with European and Indonesian heritage; Jair is a male adult learner with Mestizo/Indigenous heritage from South America; and Ashley is a female Indigenous learner with Wet'sewet'en Carrier heritage. Drawing from theory on culturally relevant assessment, we present an assessment model that privileges students' many ways of knowing in the context of a course on child welfare. The framework for assessing students takes into account the institutional aims and objectives of NEC, the specific course goals and learning objectives of FCC 240, and supports the diverse perspectives and experiences of the Indigenous learners who are studying to be social workers. By emphasizing these perspectives, the students can focus on their strengths as Indigenous youth, make their learning more meaningful, and place learning within a context that may be more culturally relevant.

Introduction

This paper explains a process that was used to generate a course student assessment model based on the concept of the medicine wheel for implementation in the Child Welfare course (FCC 240) at the Native Education College (NEC). Drawing on literature from education, social work, and cultural studies, we first discuss the concept of the medicine wheel, including its origins, symbolism, and pan-Indigenous usage, to situate the development of our medicine wheel assessment model. Second, we provide a rationale for the development of our assessment model by highlighting some of the history of formal education for Aboriginal learners, as well as discussing some theory and literature on cultural models of education. Third, we explain the context of NEC, including the Family and Community Counselling Program and the broader institutional goals of NEC, to