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Literature Review: Decolonizing and Indigenizing Mentorship



About Indspire

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programs, and shares resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Through Indspire's education offerings, we provide resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success for Indigenous youth. In 2019-20, Indspire awarded over \$17.8 million through more than 5,124 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside the federal government.

About Research Knowledge Nest

The Indspire *Research Knowledge Nest* is the first Indigenous research program of its kind in Canada. With data analysis skills rapidly becoming critical to economic success, the *Research Nest* is poised to seize this exciting opportunity to foster Indigenous engagement and leadership in quantitative research and data science roles. The program will be guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who will provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

Founding Supporters

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Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to synthesize information on the topic of decolonizing and Indigenizing mentorship to understand:

- Perceptions of mentorship within Indigenous communities;
- Indigenous ways of relationship building;
- Culturally-informed mentorship;
- Best practices for good quality mentoring relationships;
- Traditional structures of mentorship and why they are important.

Desired Outcome

This literature review will be used as a shared, living document that highlights best practices for decolonizing and Indigenizing mentorship.

Why is Decolonizing and Indigenizing Mentorship Important?

When discussing the processes of decolonization and Indigenization in a mentorship context, we are operating from the assumption that traditional structures of mentorship are rooted within a Eurocentric worldview that ignores and discredits Indigenous perspectives. For example:

traditional rule-oriented models of mentoring rest on assumptions of individualism and a meritocratic academic hierarchy that spring from the history of colonization; they lack historical context and an understanding of the discourses of power and belonging that can trouble any...relationship...Because it is borne from, and woven into the fabric of, a time-honored Eurocentric academic approach to training and guiding protégés, traditional mentoring is capable of neither disrupting dominant...norms nor overcoming structures that limit relational possibilities.¹

Other issues with Eurocentric mentorship models are that the relationship is structured hierarchically and only between two people, where it is understood that the mentor occupies the more powerful position.² The mentor is given the powerful place of “helping”, which “distances mentors from protégés and reinscribes the norms of power and success. Mentors who see themselves as “helping” ... are falling prey to a deficit lens and ...[playing] the role of the savior who “lifts” a student “up” out of her lower place on the social hierarchy.”³ These deficient understandings that underpin a mentor’s perception of the mentee in Eurocentric

¹ Hinsdale, *Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education*, 45, 2016. SensePublishing. eBook.

² Hinsdale, *Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education*, 50, 2016. SensePublishing. eBook.

³ Hinsdale, *Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education*, 51, 2016. SensePublishing. eBook.

mentoring programs eliminate space for building respectful, reciprocal relationships while inherently positioning the mentee as lesser.

When creating an Indigenous mentorship program, it is vital to consider the foundational models being used. Does the program use a Eurocentric mentorship structure and simply include Indigenous content? Or does it instead open spaces for Indigenous mentorship? The former comes from a place of sustaining Eurocentric knowledge and pedagogy that bends to include Indigenous content while the latter teaches from an Indigenous worldview.⁴

Indigenous Mentorship Best Practices

This section describes components identified through the literature review that contribute to Indigenous students' success and explores best practices for maintaining good mentoring relationships.

Cultural integrity

Cultural integrity means to keep “hold of one’s Indigenous understandings”⁵ and approach mentoring relationships in a way that keeps Indigenous ways of knowing as the foundations and relational processes in this connection. Centering culture in a mentoring relationship replaces the Eurocentric neutral which proports that unless culture is brought into a discussion⁶, relationships are apolitical and acultural, and instead intentionally frames the relationship with a worldview rooted in Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

Ways to approach mentoring relationships in a manner that maintains cultural integrity include:

- Using Indigenous language, as “language proficiency is a strong contributor to well-being, identity and connectedness...and ultimately Nationhood;”⁷
- Land-based learning, which uses land-based traditions for establishing and maintaining respectful relationships;⁸
- Self-location and cultural identification, in which each member of the mentoring relationships introduces themselves according to protocol, and “share their experience with culture...[which] shows respect to the ancestors and allows community to locate us.”⁹

⁴ Choate, MacLaurin, et al. “Exploring Pathways to Implement Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action For Social Work Education”, 7, July 2018. Policywise, Mount Royal University, University of Calgary.

⁵ Pidgeon, “It takes more than good intentions: Institutional accountability and responsibility to Indigenous higher education”, 143, 2008. University of British Columbia.

⁶ Hinsdale, *Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education*, 146, 2016. SensePublishing. eBook.

⁷ “[nêhiyawak Language Experience Launches New Youth Program to Strengthen Cree Language and Identity](#)”, 9 November 2020. NationTalk.

⁸ Madden, “A de/colonizing theory of truth and reconciliation education”, 293, 2019. Curriculum Inquiry, University of Alberta.

⁹ Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 110, 2009. University of Toronto Press. Book.

Distinctions-Based

An Indigenous mentorship program must avoid “pan-Indigenization,” or the presentation of Indigenous peoples as one monolithic bloc.¹⁰ Instead, this program would take a distinctions-based approach “carefully considering gendered, geographical, regional, and identities factors that make Indigenous peoples distinct”¹¹ and establishing a culturally safe place, which “considers how social and historical contexts, as well as structural and interpersonal power imbalances operate in knowledge production, relationship-building, and learning.”¹² Ultimately, the aim of an Indigenous mentorship program is to allow for trusting relationships to grow, which requires respecting differences between nations and acknowledging that “contradicting ontologies and epistemologies can co-exist without needing to align with each other or claiming more validity over other...each different world is valid and thrives from recognizing its partial connections with the rest, without striving for sameness.”¹³

Miyo

In thinking about ethical mentoring relationships, the overarching theme is to conduct oneself in a way that reflects miyo—goodness, sharing, generosity.¹⁴ Miyo-wîcêhtowin can be developed through “following protocol, showing guardianship over sacred knowledge, standing by cultural validity of knowledge, and giving back.”¹⁵ This is a Plains Cree methodology that approaches mentorship in a way in which values and ethics are interconnected, which can be used to structure the approach to all aspects of mentorship.¹⁶

¹⁰ Treleaven, “[How Canadian universities are responding to the TRC's Calls to Action](#)”, 7 December 2018.

¹¹ “Calls for Justice”, *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, 168, 2019. National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

¹² Ward, Branch, and Fridkin, “What is Indigenous Cultural Safety—and Why Should I Care About It?”, 29, 2016. *Visions Journal, Here to Help*. <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/visions/indigenous-people-vol11/what-indigenous-cultural-safety-and-why-should-i-care-about-it>

¹³ Wong-Villacres et al., “Decolonizing Learning Spaces for Sociotechnical Research and Design”, 521, 2020. *Computer-Supported Collaborative Work Companion, Workshop*.

¹⁴ Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 147, 2009. University of Toronto Press. Book.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 147, 2009. University of Toronto Press. Book.

Non-hierarchical

Indigenous mentorship should not be hierarchical in manner, but should allow for a space of self-reflection, sharing power, and interconnectedness.¹⁷ Offering each other stories is a way of decolonizing relationships, allowing for vulnerability as a path towards building trust, and honouring each other's knowledge in a way that makes everyone feel heard and seen.¹⁸

It is important for mentees to feel that they have a say in this mentoring relationship, and they should seek relationships with mentors "they feel have engaged with them on both academic and emotional levels."¹⁹ This engagement can be created by potential mentors asking for a mentee's opinion "or start discussions that seek common ground"²⁰, which will develop space to "invite students into the pedagogical relationship."²¹

Peer support

In the journal article "Supporting Success: Aboriginal Students in Higher Education" by Cynthia J. Gallop and Nicole Bastien, the authors performed a qualitative research study to identify factors that contribute to Indigenous students' success in post-secondary education, through the students' own lens of what qualifies as success. In their research, they found that peer support was integral to remaining motivated to stay in school, and "provided [each other] with a sense of community, which helped them overcome...obstacles, such as being far away from home or worrying that they would not fit in."²² Peer support is important to develop a sense of belonging and a shared experience in which students feel heard, understood, and inspired.

In Margaret Kovach's book *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, she has a conversation with Kathy Absolon in which Absolon builds on this particular need for conversation and peer support. Absolon states:

*If I was at home in my own community, I would be bantering back and forth with people in my community...We need to be talking about these things and creating a space for us to write, read, and get feedback from each other. I think part of it is that you get so used to working in isolation, you just don't think to ask.*²³

Through this quote, we can see that for processing academic data and performing research, having peer support to discuss these topics is important for informing one's work. A key component of Indigenous mentorship is reciprocity – providing the experience one has to

¹⁷ Hinsdale, "Mentoring and Decolonization", 4, 2016. Westminster College.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Hinsdale, *Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education*, 45, 2016. SensePublishing. eBook.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Bastien and Gallop, "Supporting Success: Aboriginal Students in Higher Education", 216, 2016. Canadian Journal of Higher Education.

²³ Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 154, 2009. University of Toronto Press.

benefit the community – and peer support is a way in which Indigenous students can fulfill their responsibilities.

Reflection/self-reflexivity

In his paper entitled “Memory comes before knowledge: research may improve if researchers remember their motives”, Eber Hampton “advises researchers to go back in time to unfold the sacred medicine bundle that holds memories and consider how memory shapes personal truth”²⁴. If we use this methodology as an approach to mentorship, we allow for mentors and mentees to really understand their intentions for entering into a mentoring relationship, dislodging potentially problematic approaches and assumptions. This methodology would also allow for “the interrogation of interconnectivity of self and external world, and our responsibilities to our social, physical, and ecological environment”²⁵, setting the groundwork for this relationship to proceed in a good way.

²⁴ Hampton, “Memory Comes before Knowledge: Research May Improve if Researchers Remember the Motives”, Paper Presented at the First Biannual Indigenous Scholars’ Conference, 15-18, 1995. University of Alberta.

²⁵ Dei, “Decolonizing the University: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Education”, 41, 2016. Socialist Studies, OISE, University of Toronto.

Evaluation Examples

In the article “Indigenous Principles Decolonizing Teacher Education: What We Have Learned” by University of Victoria professors Kathy Sanford, Lorna Williams, Tim Hopper, and Catherine McGregor, there were many interesting examples of assessment and evaluation which could be applied to understanding the knowledge gained through mentoring relationships. The first example that Sanford, Williams, Hopper, and McGregor provide is Pole Carving, where “all members of the Pole Carving course were responsible for their own learning and for the learning of the group, as they assisted with the carving and the documenting of the learning that occurred during the course, and after the course was completed”.²⁶ This method allows for reciprocal teachings to emerge, and while this method is rooted in Lil’wat ways of knowing and being, this is a good example of how Indigenous methods can be used to not only assess one’s journey, but also to promote mutual learning.

Another example from Sanford, Williams, Hopper and McGregor’s article is a process of gathering artifacts to demonstrate the learning journey. Through this assessment piece:

*students gather a range of artifacts, recollect the meaning behind each of these learning artifacts, and reflect on their significance to themselves and to the enhancement of their profession. Through a wide array of alternative modes showing evidence of learning, i.e., photographs, artwork, physical engagement, voice, or multimodal representations, students are enabled to demonstrate evidence of their learning, to take pride in the individuality of their work that becomes part of the community’s understanding, and to share their learning with a broader community of learners.*²⁷

Sanford, Williams, Hopper and McGregor state that this method ensures that those involved “take greater responsibility for their learning and recognize the relationships between different learning experiences in courses, outside experiences, and practicum experiences, making connections where none existed previously.”²⁸ As well, using this method of gathering artifacts as assessment allows mentors and mentees autonomy over their evaluation, ensuring that their voices are heard; it could potentially be used as promotional material to demonstrate the stories and successes of the mentorship program. As the showcasing of the artifacts could take any form, the results could be unique, engaging future participants and contributing to shared learnings.

An interesting peer support evaluation method would be developing an Underground Curriculum, which is “a non-course created and offered by students”²⁹ to explore issues

²⁶ Sanford, Williams, Hopper, and McGregor, “Indigenous Principles Decolonizing Teacher Education: What We Have Learned”, 25-6, 2012. University of Victoria.

²⁷ Sanford, Williams, Hopper, and McGregor, “Indigenous Principles Decolonizing Teacher Education: What We Have Learned”, 27, 2012. University of Victoria.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Sanford, Williams, Hopper, and McGregor, “Indigenous Principles Decolonizing Teacher Education: What We Have Learned”, 28, 2012. University of Victoria.

pertaining to Indigeneity that may not have been addressed in the participants' post-secondary institution(s). This Underground Curriculum could be co-created by mentees and mentors for the benefit of all in the mentorship program³⁰, moving from the Eurocentric model of education as extractive to a method of learning as reciprocal. The Underground Curriculum would demonstrate mentees' learnings and showcase mentorship results in real time.

The research-sharing circles are also an option to pursue for evaluation purposes, as they provide "a forum for people to relate their stories in a holistic fashion that was not fragmented by a structured interview process"³¹ and allow for relationship building and relational understandings to occur. It's a method that is founded on Indigenous ways of knowing, as "a method to engender story. It is meant to provide space, time, and an environment for participants to share their story in a manner that they can direct"³². It's important to note, however, that pursuing a research-sharing circle may go against certain nations' cultural protocols, and it may be seen as an inappropriate method of gaining research results.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 99, 2009. University of Toronto Press. Book.

³² Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 124, 2009. University of Toronto Press. Book.

Appendix A. Definition of Key Terms

Epistemology

“The theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. Epistemology is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion.”³³

Decolonization in Post-Secondary Institutions

To decolonize post-secondary institutions is to transform "the dominant colonial ways that are inherent within academe"³⁴ by removing Eurocentric worldviews as the foundational epistemology to knowledge acquisition and production in post-secondary institutions. Decolonization "must include processes that support the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples, the preservation of cultural practices and identity, as well as the acknowledgement and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing."³⁵

Indigenizing Post-Secondary Institutions

Indigenizing post-secondary institutions is a process of reforming the ways in which post-secondary education is taught. It includes changing the curriculum to reflect Indigenous worldviews, from course content and evaluation to the inclusion of Indigenous professors and the creation of opportunities for students to learn about topics pertaining to Indigeneity.³⁶

Eurocentric Mentorship

A relationship in which an “experienced (usually older) faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced (usually younger) student or faculty member”³⁷. This mentoring relationship is based on “some level of mutual interest... and endures through several phases or ‘seasons’”³⁸ through which a mentor supports their mentee’s pursuit of achievement in a particular field.

Indigenous Mentorship

A non-hierarchical approach in which mentors and mentees honour each other's knowledges and gifts using “the principles of mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing, and mutual responsibility.”³⁹ Indigenous mentorship focuses on building relationships that are respectful and reciprocal, and that recognize each other’s sociocultural contexts in ways that allow for

³³ “Epistemology”, 2020. Lexico.com, Oxford Dictionary. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/epistemology>

³⁴ Choate, MacLaurin, et al. “Exploring Pathways to Implement Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action For Social Work Education”, 5, July 2018. Policywise, Mount Royal University, University of Calgary.

³⁵ Choate, MacLaurin, et al. “Exploring Pathways to Implement Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action For Social Work Education”, 9, July 2018. Policywise, Mount Royal University, University of Calgary.

³⁶ Choate, MacLaurin, et al. “Exploring Pathways to Implement Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action For Social Work Education”, 5, July 2018. Policywise, Mount Royal University, University of Calgary.

³⁷Hinsdale, *Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education*, 46, 2007. Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, Publishers.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ “Honouring the truth, reconciliation for the future: Summary of the final report of the truth and reconciliation commission of Canada”, 186, 2015b. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

vulnerability, trust and confidence to emerge.⁴⁰ Through these relationships, mentees are guided to maintain cultural integrity, find their gifts and community roles, and understand their responsibility of reciprocity.⁴¹

Mentorship is not relegated to a one-to-one basis, and in Lil'wat ways of knowing, there is a shared understanding that communities are responsible for "offer[ing] what knowledge and expertise they have to benefit the communal work being carried out."⁴² Intergenerational teaching and sharing throughout Indigenous communities are good examples of demonstrating our responsibilities for relating what we are experiencing to others.⁴³

⁴⁰ Hinsdale, "Mentoring and Decolonization", 4, 2016. Westminster College.

⁴¹ Bastien and Gallop, "Supporting Success: Aboriginal Students in Higher Education", 204, 2016. Canadian Journal of Higher Education.

⁴² Sanford, Williams, Hopper and McGregor, "Indigenous Principles Decolonizing Teacher Education: What We Have Learned", 24, 2012. University of Victoria.

⁴³ "Considerations for Mentoring Indigenous Children and Youth", 5, 2017. Alberta Mentoring Partnerships.

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