SUPPORTING WELLNESS FOR FIRST NATION STUDENTS

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Indigenous Students and the School System
Land, family and community learning
“Aboriginal people believe that children do not belong to us but are gifts sent from the Creator. It is our job to nurture and guide children throughout their childhood so they will grow to fulfill their purpose while on this earth. Because children are so sacred it is everyone’s responsibility to nurture them and keep them safe, to provide them with unconditional love and attention so they will know they are wanted and hold a special place in the circle. Every child regardless of age, or disability has gifts and teaches us lessons. They are all unique and should be respected.”

(A Sense of Belonging: Supporting Healthy Child Development in Aboriginal Families, 2006)
Indigenous Students and Schools
Going Beyond The Stats

• Information and statistics have highlighted many of the challenges faced by Indigenous youth. These include:
  • Significant losses (language, culture, identity, traditional skills, Indigenous knowledge, etc)
  • Social problems (poverty, low educational attainment, unemployment, substandard housing, child welfare)
  • Health problems (chronic & infectious illnesses, high suicide rates, substance abuse, violence, intergenerational trauma, accurate diagnosis, etc)
“young people need anger management skills and ways to deal with sad thoughts instead of taking it to extremes. It seems like it’s getting to be a trend”
Mental Health Concerns

- Struggles against negative stereotypes, racism and discrimination – a sense of a constant struggle in a hostile and rejecting environment – is a cause of ‘mental illness’ in FN youth
- Fear of sharing information when accessing support services may result in their privacy not being respected and that they and their families will be pulled into the child welfare system
- Few healthy role models and support systems to help youth deal with their struggles
Health Impacts from Structural Racism

**CHRONIC MENTAL HEALTH**

- Geographic dispersion; economic marginalization
- Poverty; Food Insecurity
- Poor diet; inattentiveness
- **LEARNING PROBLEMS OR ADHD**

**ACUTE MENTAL HEALTH**

- Historical trauma; contemporary discrimination
- Emotional, spiritual and intergenerational trauma
- Anger, poor coping
- **SUICIDE**
Indigenous Student Experiences in Schools

- What do you do when the curriculum does not reflect the reality you know?
- The textbooks don't teach what I want to learn?
- What is “educational success”?
- We have lots to offer our campuses too!
- Campus has buildings to show native presence?
- Indigenous knowledge is being incorporated into classrooms?
- Create supportive relationships & opportunities to reduce isolation?
- Programs to increase graduation?
- Do I have the tools to help students?

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

Feeling ISOLATED
- Support? Good relationships?
  - Yes
  - No
- More likely to stay in school
- Might leave school

How can we help educate non-indigenous students & staff about these cultural differences to support?
Factors that Influence Wellness

1. Colonization & its impacts:
2. Social determinants of health:
3. Protective factors
4. Worldview: understanding the context of childhood development through a worldview paradigm is essential!
Colonial Worldview in Education

• Colonialism dictates what gets put into history books. Mainstream knowledge is highlighted in education and mainstream dialogue while Indigenous knowledge is either missing or, if shared, is minimized or denied

• Lack of connection to culture is a risk factor for social problems such as all forms of violence, substance abuse and mental health problems such as suicidal behavior
Colonial worldview focuses on deficits
We miss the strengths of the people
Without a vision of wellness
Strengths Based Approach

The reality is, the strength is in what we cannot see... or have not invested in seeing.

Strengths exist despite the statistics.

A strengths based approach attends to wellness.
Efforts to facilitate change must be directed toward connecting one to identity vs. to fix deficits
CULTURAL WELLNESS IS A CONNECTION TO ORIGIN

- Wellness from an Indigenous perspective is a *whole and healthy person* expressed through a sense of balance of body, mind, emotion and spirit. Central to wellness is belief in one’s connection to language, land, beings of creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment.

_Elder Jim Dumont_
Wellness

- Wellness is supported by culture, language, Elders and families, natural environment and is necessary for healthy individuals, families and communities.
- A critical component to achieving wellness is an approach that respects, values and utilizes traditional and cultural knowledge, methodologies, language and ways of knowing.
- Wellness is a holistic concept that is an inseparable and integral part of a strong cultural identity.
Culture is the expression, the life-ways, and the spiritual, psychological, social, AND material practice of this Indigenous worldview.

Elder Jim Dumont’
Culture as the Foundation

• Culture is an important social determinant of health, and as a holistic concept of health is an integral part of a strong cultural identity.

• Many First Nations communities believe that the way to achieve individual, family, and community wellness (a balance of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life) is through culturally specific, holistic interventions. (FNMWC)
Keys to Fostering Wellbeing for Indigenous Students
Decolonization of Indigenous Knowledge

Inclusion of Indigenous Evidence and Research Methods
Indigenous Knowledge

- Strength and resiliency based
- Spirituality based
- Community-specificity, place-based, wise practices (vs. universal, ‘best’ practices)
- Importance of knowing history
- Circles of caring and learning (relational)
- Nurturing a strong sense of identity and self-development (personal, family, community)
- Continuity of engagement in a continuum of care
- Importance of culture and language
Indigenous Knowledge Application

- Indigenous Intelligence involves more than the acquisition of knowledge and the manipulation of thoughts; intelligence has to do with activating knowledge into something useable within a system that is charged with meaning.
What Our Knowledge Says About Resiliency

- The elasticity in Indigenous peoples resiliency comes from one’s spiritually endowed identity & values

- A core constellation of values have been found to be sufficiently resistant to acculturation so as to persist over time and through various assimilative forces. (Dumont, 1993)
Developing resilience

1. IDENTITY
2. FAMILY
3. COMMUNITY
4. CULTURE, LANGUAGE, CONNECTION
Culture & resiliency

• Connection to culture and a strong sense of cultural identity has been found to demonstrate the following:
  • Associated with prosocial behavior in youth
  • Increases values of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity in youth
  • Discourages risky health behaviors and encourages generally stable and positive health practices
  • Combats the effects of stress and negative health outcomes
  • Buffers depressive symptoms and alcohol in adults
  • Protects against alcohol misuse, the impact of discrimination, and suicide

• As listed in Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, Burns & Camillo (2010)
IDENTITY
IDENTITY

The way we dress our children should be a reflection of their inherent gifts ... The DNA, string of life.

As helpers we have the same obligation... to help people connect with their identity and then help dress them up with their inherent gifts / strengths.
FAMILY
FAMILY

• Traditional parenting promotes interconnectedness & balance
• Secures knowledge of family, extended family, clan, community, nation, natural world
• Promotes bonding
• Promotes identity for self and to community
Teaches gifts & connections

Connection to Creation is Critical to Wellness
COMMUNITY
Natural Protective Network Principle

• Belief of children as a sacred gift that is interconnected with family, community and nation
• Interconnections create an instant and inherent network of support
CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND CONNECTION
Ceremonial lodges facilitate cultural wellness through spiritual connection (ceremony) and through the transmission of teaching/story and therefore KNOWLEDGE of how to live ‘life to the fullest’ flows from within the lodge structures.

Lodge is the place that facilitates wellness.
“We need to learn how to do things like smudge, use sage, help others and be educated on how these traditions work again”
“We must stick with the language because that’s the thing that’s going to get us through. That’s our only identity now. This is the place where we can re-learn all those things what our ancestors did. That’s why I’m teaching my children to be prepared for the future… to keep our language…is very important”
The importance of language to wellness

“About 1995 almost 95% of our children spoke Oji-Cree now all you hear is English - even the small ones. In Webequie, we had 7 (counseling) open files back then, and maybe they were scared but when I left to retire last year there were about 600 open files…”
Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK) continues to work on improving the quality of education for our people, while remaining vigilant in maintaining and revitalizing our Mi'kmaq language.

- High school graduation rates among First Nation students in Nova Scotia were nearly 88%, considerably higher than the national average of 35%;
- Numeracy and literacy rates in elementary and secondary schools increased;
- More than 500 First Nation students were enrolled in post secondary institutions;
- Eighty-eight First Nation students graduated from a post secondary institution in 2013 and went out into the world, confidently expanding their personal horizons and ready to make a change in their communities; and
- Our special needs students are getting the focused attention they need to grow and thrive.

http://kinu.ca/introducing-mikmaw-kinamatnewey
Youth who are given the opportunity to learn how to manage transitions through cultural ceremonies and teachings gain understanding:

- Personal capacity
- Roles (gender, family, community)
- Abilities to cope with life challenges
Supporting Healthy Development

- Completed tasks of development result in:
  - Feeling loved, cared for, protected
  - Cultural pride
  - Leadership skills
  - Problem solving skills
  - Healthy decision making
  - Competent in cultural and mainstream activities
  - Strong self-worth
  - Able to function regardless of racism that exists and be a social advocate
All of this is Made Up of Relationships

Relational worldview connections as integral part to living and creating wellness
WHAT YOUTH ARE SAYING.....
Indigenous Student Voices Talk About Success

• **Care** about them and who they are as Indigenous people;
• **Expect** them to succeed in education; and,
• **Help** them to learn about their cultures, histories and languages.

OECD 2017
“We want to have a deeper connection to the land, our traditions, communities and elders and live in communities where we can give back and help one another”
Youth Needs

• Youth engagement & youth empowerment
• To speak their traditional language
• To be connected to their traditional world as well as the modern world
• Strong sense of identity as First Nations young people
• Healthy adults in communities free of addictions in order to be good parents, community leaders and mentors
• Collaboration & partnership by all levels of government to work together to address challenges and needs of FN youth
• Access to (culturally competent) counseling supports
• Skills to support someone who is talking suicide
Needs & Education

• Indigenous knowledge, traditions and cultural practices must be fully inclusive within the school system

• Community based schools to be a community space for gatherings for connecting
  • Schools a safe place to have access to sports, arts and recreational activities
  • Place to connect elders and youth to teach and learn traditional cultural practices of the community
  • Community based schools to keep families together and eliminate harm from discrimination, racism, lack of cultural sensitivity/relevancy, depression, substance abuse & suicide
“kids going to school out of the community need weekend passes to go home and be with their families so they have something to work towards”
Needs at a Community Level

- Leadership and government at all levels must ensure communities have basic things such as schools, safe housing, clean water, secure access to affordable nutritious food
- More is being done to address the legacy of generations still struggling with the impact of colonization and residential schools
- Government must ensure funding in place to provide culturally-informed social and clinical services to address intergenerational trauma for all ages
- Greater accountability & transparency of leadership particularly as it relates to spending community resources
Tools to Support a Language and Vision of Wellness
❖ Honouring Our Strengths: A Renewed Framework to Address Substance Use Among First Nations in Canada

❖ First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework

❖ TRC 94 Calls to Action

❖ The Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal People
First Nations Voice said...
Outcomes

Wellness is a balance of the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical. This balance is enriched as individuals have:

- **HOPE** for their future and those of their families that is grounded in a sense of identity, unique Indigenous values, and having a belief in spirit (Spiritual wellness)

- a sense of **BELONGING** and connectedness within their families, to community, and to culture (Emotional wellness)

- a sense of **MEANING** and an understanding of how their lives and those of their families and communities are part of creation and a rich history (Mental wellness)

- **PURPOSE** in their daily lives whether it is through education, employment, care-giving activities, or cultural ways of being and doing (Physical wellness)
FINAL THOUGHTS

• What was given to us comes from the Creator and has been passed to us through our Creation Story. Our Creation Story provides all of the answers we need to living a good life.

• We have evidence in our knowledge as Indigenous people and this evidence is thousands of years old. We do not need others to provide us with the answers to health and wellness, we need to have the space to realize our evidence to achieve health and wellness.

• It is incumbent upon each of you to support students to discover their strengths and gifts by supporting them at an individual, professional, organizational and systems level.
Miigwech/Thank You/Merci
CASE EXAMPLES

CONNECTIONS

• Including cultural knowledge and language into curriculum for wellness that creates meaning for healthy coping

• Helping create relationships in provincial school systems that creates belonging
CASE EXAMPLES

HELPING YOUTH DEFINE THEIR PURPOSE

• No judgement regardless of their circumstances
• Helping them recognize their strengths
• Finding opportunities
• Supporting change
CASE EXAMPLES

TRAUMA INFORMED CARE MODELS

• Wiidooktaadyang
• Meeting people where they are at
•Creating wellness based on what the person needs
• Connections
• Hope, Belonging, Meaning and Purpose
My dancing helps to heal our past hurts and trauma
Kwala'yu my reason for living
Hase' you are an extension of
my breath
Being a mother is greatest gift and highest honour.
My son is growing, living and breathing proof of strength and resilience.
Autumn Christopher, 18, of the Canim Lake Band (Secwepemc Nation) is standing 2nd from the left. Here he is, connecting with culture at his Family Hunting Camp with his dad, uncles, cousins and grandpa in their traditional territory hunting moose.
My name is Jordan Loon, 25, and I am a Nishnawbe Aski Nation Oshkaatisak Youth Council member here in Northern Ontario - Treaty 9.

I honour my culture by hunting, fishing and being on the land, at camp. I grew up in the city, so I always take the chance I get to go hunting and camping because I grew up doing it. I enjoy showing my siblings what I learnt from my grandparents because, they aren't around now, sadly.
Culture FOR LIFE

Here’s How I Connect With My Culture...

HELPING MY BROTHER TAKE HIS FIRST STEPS ON MOTHER EARTH

-KIONA

My Culture. My Life.

Connect With Culture FOR LIFE: cultureforlife.ca
Youth and dancing

My culture is my life: attending a Buffalo kill before the sundance.

The meat was used to feed 600 people in the camp for 5 days.
My way of life. It keeps me grounded & connected. I enjoy being out in the land just like my late father & my late mooshoom before me.

Neo Williams,
Kashechewan First Nation
Boa Brown, 24, of West Moberly First Nation. Drymeat making to provide for my family. My greatest gift my grandmother ever gave me: the gift of culture and the gift of traditions.