

Indigenous Post-Secondary Mentorship: Our Journey

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Abstract

This article explores the use of mentorship as a source of support for Indigenous post-secondary students and as a way to disrupt the dominance of Western worldviews in academic institutions. Although there is a significant amount of literature written on the topic of mentorship, very little of it describes how educators can actually conceptualize the idea of providing mentorship to students. This article begins to fill that gap by describing a mentorship relationship that developed between a Métis post-secondary student and a Métis faculty member and provides suggestions around mentorship for consideration by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in education systems.

Keywords

Indigenous, post-secondary, mentorship

Introduction

The number of Indigenous peoples in Canada with a post-secondary degree is on the rise: according to Statistics Canada, 6% had a university degree in 2001, 8% in 2006, and 9.8% in 2011. Despite these promising increases, however, the rates are proportionally small when compared to those of non-Indigenous Canadians: 20% reported having a post-secondary degree in 2001, 23% in 2006, and 26.5% in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2006; 2011). Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous allies have long argued that these disparities are a direct result of the lack of fit between the learning needs of Indigenous students and the Western paradigms that dominate post-secondary institutions (Cote-Meek, 2014; Green, et al., 2013; Louie, Pratt, Hanson, & Ottmann, 2017).

Racism and oppression have been and continue to be interwoven throughout post-secondary education systems. For many Indigenous peoples, it is impossible to ignore the reality that the Western education of Indigenous peoples, which started with missionary day and boarding schools and then residential schools, has historically been a direct agent of colonization. This link makes the history of oppression and education inseparable and accentuates the ways in which oppressive ideologies continue to shape modern education and are perpetuated each time an Indigenous person “is taught history that neither describes or reflects her experience as an Indigenous person; or conversely, is denied a vocabulary with which to describe and challenge histories of colonization that continue to shape his everyday life” (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 164).

In fact, Western worldviews continue to dominate educational systems at every level. Indigenous scholars have challenged the assumption that institutions are ideologically neutral and have questioned the belief ingrained within post-secondary education that a Western worldview is automatically relevant, superior, and universally applicable (Baskin, 2005; Blackstock, 2019; Cote-Meek, 2014; Dumbrill & Green, 2008; Hart, 2004; Sinclair, 2004). They contend that we must disrupt that influence by focusing on the ways in which Western frameworks dominate academic learning and by situating Western knowledge as *a* way of knowing rather than *the* way of knowing and the foundation from which all other perspectives are viewed.

These conversations have highlighted the need for overarching, structural changes within post-secondary systems, causing educators to question how they can make concrete changes in their programs and classrooms to contribute to this larger systemic shift. Suggestions for how to do so have begun to emerge within the literature, including the need for educators to be prepared to address the reluctance, hostility and racism that may be directed towards Indigenous students in the classroom when topics such as privilege arise (Cote-Meek, 2014); to recruit, hire, and retain Indigenous peoples into post-secondary institutions and ensure that their voices are first and foremost in discussions around racism and oppression (Lawrence, 2011; Weaver, 2000); and to

create time and space (for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators) to explore biases, stereotypes and cultural indifference (Baskin, 2016; Weaver, 2000). Many of these suggestions have focussed on the importance of supportive relationships, including connecting students with supports such as Elders and First Nations Centres (Weaver, 2000), providing peer supports (Rawana, Sieukaran, Nguyen, & Pitawanakwat, 2015; Weaver, 2000), and ensuring that students registered in practical disciplines requiring field placements have Indigenous mentors available (Burke, 2019).

Despite the promise of this emerging scholarship, however, there is a lack of literature available to educators around how to operationalize these ideas. This article attempts to bridge that gap in one small way by exploring a specific avenue of Indigenous student support: the use of mentorship relationships between educators and post-secondary students. In the following pages, we outline some of the literature around mentorship and then share a conversation we had about our mentorship journey as a Métis post-secondary social work student and a Métis post-secondary faculty member.

Mentorship

Mentorship plays a role in cultures around the world. Although it is woven into the traditional values of many Indigenous peoples, in many communities its use has been disrupted by colonialism (Klinck et al., 2005). As such, reclaiming the practice of mentorship has been identified as one way for Indigenous peoples to reconnect to their cultures and identities (Bulman & Hayes, 2011). The benefits to Indigenous peoples of having Indigenous mentors has been documented in various areas, including the performing arts (Beagan, 2011), nursing (Best & Stuart, 2014), the labor market (Mangan & Trendle, 2019), education (Maher, 2010), disease prevention (Adams, Browne, Palermo, & Radford, 2016; Paasse & Adams, 2011), and fatherhood (Fletcher et al., 2017). Researchers have also written about the benefits to adults (Paasse & Adams, 2011) as well as children and youth (Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, & Hughes, 2010; Goodman, Snyder, & Wilson, 2018; McCaleman et al., 2016; Stevens, Andrade, & Page, 2016; Trout, Wexler, & Moses, 2018; Zinga, 2012).

Mentorship has also been explored in the context of post-secondary education. The literature has identified the lack of Indigenous peers, professors, and other role models and mentors as a barrier to the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students in social work programs (Cross, Day, Gogliotti, & Pung, 2013), psychology (Harris, Hill, & Kiernan, 2012), and nursing (Best & Stuart, 2014; Rearden, 2012; Wilson, McKinney, & Rapata-Hanning, 2011), as well as in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (Windchief & Brown, 2017). In a study completed in Australia, Indigenous doctoral students described feelings of isolation generated by a lack of Indigenous peer groups or Indigenous supervisors (Carter, Hollinsworth, Raciti, & Gilbey, 2018). As a corollary, Indigenous students have identified social support, such as Indigenous student centers, monthly meetings, and social outings, as important to them being able to succeed in post-secondary institutions (Guillory, 2009; Rearden, 2012). For Indigenous

post-secondary students, the benefits of mentorship arguably include trickle down effects to younger generations within communities (Maher, 2010); a shared understanding of cultural issues helping to facilitate access to mainstream resources (Paasse & Adams, 2011); expanded social support networks (Paasse & Adams, 2011); emotional support (Rearden, 2012); learning how to navigate institutional structures and politics (Mackey & Shannon, 2014); and helping to connect to the campus community, and to receive academic and emotional support and assistance in the development of goals (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007).

Interestingly, the literature also indicates that there are benefits for Indigenous mentors participating in mentorship programs. These benefits include the opportunity to explore their own cultural identities, to feel connected to community, to expand networks of social support, to create new partnerships among organizations, and to develop skills such as first aid, food handling, and leadership (Barnett & Te Wiata, 2017; Harwood, Kervin, & Humphry, 2013; Paasse & Adams, 2011). These findings are mirrored in studies with other minority and marginalized groups which suggest benefits for peer mentors themselves (Berrick, Young, Cohen, & Anthony, 2011; Dugdale, Elison, Davies, Ward, & Dalton, 2016).

The literature on mentorship, which largely supports the idea that having a one-on-one person available to provide support can benefit post-secondary Indigenous students, intuitively made sense to us as both an educator and a post-secondary student; at the same time we were curious to explore the reality of what it would mean for us: the logistics of how we could be connected in a mentor-mentee role and how we could create and sustain a productive mentorship relationship. In the next section, we invite you to read a bit about our mentorship journey and what we learned along the way.

Our Mentorship Journey

Situating Ourselves

Nadine: My name is Nadine. I'm from Fort Smith, a little town in the Northwest Territories. Traditionally, this was primarily Dene and Cree territory. I'm a Métis woman, born and raised there. Academically, I've done a number of different things. After high school, I went to an international school for two years and completed an International Baccalaureate diploma. Then I tried Geography for a few years. When I decided that wasn't the right fit for me, I took some time off from university. During that period, social work stood out as a career that really complemented my values and ways of interacting with people. I was accepted into the social work program at Aurora College in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories where I completed three years towards my undergraduate degree. Those years were really important not only because of the strong Indigenous focus in that program, but also because personally I was able to reconnect with my culture and learn from some incredible Elders and role models. The final year of my

degree was in (province) at the (university), which was another wonderful experience. I graduated recently and I'm now working as a community social worker in Fort Smith.

Susan: My name is Susan. I was born and raised on the traditional territory of the Lheidli T'enneh people in Northern British Columbia (BC) and I'm French-Canadian Métis. I was a frontline social worker for about twenty years before I started teaching social work at the University of Northern British Columbia, where I still work. I have a bit of an eclectic academic background, too, with an undergraduate degree in Geography, a Master's in Social Work, and a PhD in Health Sciences. I feel really passionate about being a professor in a post-secondary institution and at the same time I feel this acute awareness that many Indigenous students feel like they don't fit in university and like they don't have the supports that they need. It's become a personal goal of mine to explore how faculty members can change that, how we can go about bringing some of the ideas in the literature into our classrooms and institutions in meaningful ways.

What Brought us to the Mentorship Relationship

Nadine: What brought me to this mentorship relationship is that an Indigenous organization that provided me with a scholarship offered students the opportunity to be mentored by someone from their field of study. They have it set up so you can be mentored in three areas: research, practice, or education and they connect you with someone who is best suited to your needs or interests. And it was quite nice for me because you, (Susan) have a bit of all of those!

Susan: Interestingly, the same Indigenous organization supported me financially through scholarships and bursaries, first when I was earning my Master's degree and then my PhD. I came across an email from them offering mentors to Indigenous post-secondary students and it occurred to me that they might also need Métis and First Nations faculty mentors because we make up only about 2% of the faculty in Canada (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2010). So I thought this might be an opportunity for me to give back to the organization for the help that they gave me. Ironically, I had just completed some research that suggested that mentorship might be helpful for First Nations and Métis post-secondary students (Burke, 2019) and I also felt like this might be a good opportunity to put my research into action by stepping forward to become a mentor.

Nadine: The program really attracted me because there were so few Indigenous social workers around me at the time. So I think it was wonderful that there was another way for me to access information and have someone who understands the intricacies of being Indigenous and trying to navigate working in a field that has a history of being invasive and oppressive towards Indigenous people.

Susan: Yes, I think most of us went to post-secondary school and then practiced social work without having any Métis or First Nations people to model ourselves after or to turn to for support and advice. As you've pointed out, (Nadine), social work has a history of oppressing and marginalizing Indigenous peoples; yet I can see the number of Indigenous social work students increasing in the classrooms we share and the literature supports the idea that our numbers are growing (see BCGEU, 2015; Fallon, MacLaurin, Trocmé, & Felstiner, 2003; Kwin, Lefebvre, Fallon, & Trocmé 2015). We can see that as Indigenous peoples we are re/claiming our right to have space in professions like social work, which I think is resulting in these professions shifting towards being less Western and more inclusive, yet I can't help but wonder who is walking alongside the students and social workers who are part of this fundamental shift.

How We Started Out

Nadine: Our interaction was pretty structured to begin with. The program coordinator was an amazing resource in the sense of setting us up and making sure that we were a good fit. There was a pretty extensive interview actually. I remember I was in my car and I had to pull over and I was talking to her on the phone and there were so many questions— but she was just making sure our personalities matched and our future goals also correlated somewhat.

The first meeting between you and me was much more structured than any of the following meetings. I understand it was just the practical piece of the program - but I think after that we both kind of agreed that we wanted more of that organic conversation and just to let it flow. We checked all the boxes as required by the Program, but we also didn't let the administrative tasks change the relationship that we both wanted and we chose our own path that felt right for us.

Susan: I remember that we started out in the beginning by having a Facetime call so we could see each other and get a sense of each other's environments and up until then I had been feeling a little bit, I don't know, unsure of what my role would be and how we were going to go about doing this. As soon as I met you, though, I felt like we connected and had a lot in common and then it became relaxed. The Facetime call was helpful in that I got to see you and get a sense of your energy but also seeing some of your house and yard, hearing your family talking in the background, all of that contributed to me getting a sense of who you are as a person. After that, meeting over the phone rather than by video conference for our future conversations worked for me and, like you said, I think as we found that rhythm it felt increasingly comfortable.

What the Experience has Been Like

Nadine: The experience has been really beneficial for me. I think the way that you and I started out was pretty unique because other students were matched with mentors in their community or somewhere close by, whereas you and I are a province and territory apart so when the program administrators were encouraging face to face contact, that wasn't really a plausible option for us. We made the distance work, though. It's been wonderful to have a sounding board, someone who is non-judgmental and who gives me space to have my feelings and thoughts - no matter

how irrational. It's great to have someone who is genuinely interested in the situations that I'm facing and can offer me insight because you've had similar experiences and that's something special that you don't come across every day. It's also given me different opportunities that I don't think I would get otherwise. So, really, I am truly grateful.

Susan: It's been a really great experience for me too! It's actually funny because in the beginning my focus was on doing something to benefit you as a post-secondary student, not realizing how much it would also benefit me. I feel stretched in a thousand different directions in my role as a faculty member. When I came across the email requesting mentees, I had just published some research that showed the importance of mentorship for Indigenous students in post-secondary institutions. So I put my name forward as a mentor out of a sense of personal duty, thinking, "I should probably put my money where my mouth is". It took me by surprise how much I enjoyed it on a personal level and how much it contributed to my development, understanding, and peace of mind as an educator. Later on, when we completed the literature review for this article, I saw that my experience is supported by the literature, which shows benefits to mentors (see Barnett & Te Wiata, 2017; Harwood, Kervin, & Humphy, 2013; Paasse & Adams, 2011).

I think the biggest lesson I took from this experience is that, as a mentor, you get as much or more from a mentorship relationship as what you invest into it. There's been a different quality to the relationship I've had with you than with the students I teach and that's been really fulfilling for me. Although there are many ways in which I also mentor those students, it's so easy to get caught up in the busyness of the semester – lecturing and marking and just trying to get through – and it's impossible to ignore the fact that it's also my responsibility to evaluate their work which results in a bit of a power differential. Our mentorship relationship nurtured my role as a teacher because you and I were able to make the time to talk about things that we probably wouldn't have discussed if I was your professor and that gave me added insight into what my students might be experiencing. The other thing that surprised me is that our conversations created space for me to reflect on my own practice as a social worker and social work educator. You and I spent a lot of time talking about self-care and boundaries and the colonial nature of social work practice and education and that made me reflect on all those things and how they apply to my life and my practice.

Opportunities to Disrupt the Domination of Western Knowledge

Nadine: Only one of the post-secondary professors I had was Indigenous and so almost all of my formal education was delivered from a Western perspective. It was really helpful to have someone to offer a Metis perspective, to discuss issues, debrief, and come up with strategies for managing.

For example, during my practicum and later my practice, there were times when I had values struggles concerning how to practice as an Indigenous worker, how to uphold my cultural beliefs

while working within a system with such a bleak past. Another example involved my struggle with being a Metis social worker working in a small community which is also my home community. There are pros and cons to working in a small community- and these are furthered when it's the community you grew up in. People knew me and my history and that I'm Metis which allowed for a certain level of trust to be established. However, people also knew a lot more about me than would be typical in a larger town or a place I hadn't grown up in which at times felt uncomfortable. When I left my home community to study, a new set of challenges arose. For a young Indigenous person, maintaining identity when your culture is not all around you can be confusing and difficult to manage. Having someone who has gone through some of these struggles was incredibly important to my growth and development as an Indigenous person, student, and social worker.

Susan: Yes, there was something really powerful about being able to have those conversations. In the social work classroom, we talk about the topics you've mentioned - value conflicts and the complexities of practicing in rural and remote locations - but that material is usually covered in a general way and taught from textbooks that have been written by non-Indigenous people. We were able to have what I'd call "insider" conversations that added an important layer of depth, that highlighted the missing pieces. It also made me question my own teaching and social work education in general: why is material covered in a general way in the classroom rather than specifically addressing the complexities faced by Indigenous social workers in deep and meaningful ways? Why are textbooks, other than those on Indigenous social work practice, usually written from the perspective of non-Indigenous people? As an example of how this learning impacted me, I changed the required texts for our undergraduate research and ethics courses during this period of time to ones that included chapters written by Indigenous scholars.

As we discussed in our literature review, historically post-secondary institutions haven't been a good fit for Indigenous students - they've been interwoven with racism, oppression, and a foundational assumption that a Western worldview is superior to other perspectives (see Blackstock, 2019; Cannon & Sunseri, 2011; Cote-Meek, 2014; Dumbrill & Green, 2008). You and I making the time and space to discuss realities like that is one concrete way for us to contribute to their disruption. To take that idea one step further, by writing this article together and hopefully providing other faculty and students with ideas around how to establish and maintain mentorship relationships, we can expand the work that we've done together exponentially.

Suggestions for Others Considering a Mentorship Relationship

Nadine: I think just respecting each other's objectives is really the most important component to a mentoring relationship. For us it was nice because I immediately felt like you always respected me and understood where I was coming from. We touched on this a bit in the literature review, but recognizing that the system we work and live in is a Western system is also important to the work mentors and mentees do. For us to ultimately make the system a better place for Indigenous

social workers and Indigenous peoples, I feel it's important for us to remember that so we can work collectively to help mitigate the imbalance. If other people are doing the same thing, it will hopefully grow and eventually change the system for the better. I truly believe such change can begin in mentorship relationships.

Susan: I completely agree. This mentorship relationship is between you and I but it's hopefully part of a much bigger picture and shift in academia and in social work in general where we find other people to turn to for support who see the world through a similar lens as us. One thing I'd suggest to faculty members interested in mentorship is to keep your eyes open for opportunities. I don't think it's always as straightforward as having someone approach you directly to be a mentor so you might have to explore opportunities as they arise. Another thing I'd suggest to educators who are considering mentoring someone in another community is that they use video-conferencing technology (such as Facetime, Skype, Zoom) for at least the first meeting so that they can see each other and then be flexible as to what the rest looks like, whether that's over the phone or by video conferencing. You and I set up monthly meetings which I also feel worked really well, not that we met every month but for the most part we were good at setting times and sticking with them. I also feel our tactic of setting a time for our next meeting at the end of each conversation worked well, especially in the busyness of the semesters when we both had lots going on. So I think not just waiting for it to happen but scheduling something and then also being flexible if the schedule has to change is really important. And I guess the other suggestion I have is in hindsight it might have been helpful if I would have asked you what you wanted or needed from me. I feel like our mentorship relationship was really prescribed in the beginning and then you and I just got into a rhythm that worked really well and so it worked out but if we had had different personalities, I could have made a misstep like giving you more advice than what you wanted from me. Or we didn't really talk about your assignments a lot and you could have wanted more academic feedback from me. In hindsight I think we got lucky in that the rhythm was natural but I think that might be an important conversation for people to have in the beginning – to just ask, “What kind of support can I offer you? If I overstep with advice or things aren't working for you, let me know”...kind of negotiate that in the beginning and then revisit it periodically.

Nadine: Yeah. Setting up those boundaries I guess because, well for us it felt natural ...so really we both got lucky but it could have worked out less positively if we were different people.

Discussion

Although we moved through our mentorship journey fairly intuitively and the process ended up being quite straightforward, in hindsight having additional information about how to best navigate the process in the beginning might have been helpful. With that in mind, we would like to close with some additional ideas from the literature regarding how to improve your chances for success. First, to allow the most potential for mentorship roles to be effective for students, it

is important to remain vigilant around ensuring that they are grounded in Indigenous worldviews rather than Western, academic frameworks. For example, Guillory (2009) conducted research at an American post-secondary institution and found that administrators and students had different perspectives on what might motivate them and reduce the barriers to attending. One administrator indicated that addressing financial barriers through scholarships increases the chances of Indigenous students being successful; however, student participants identified family and giving back to their communities as the strongest factors driving them to finish. The need for consultation with Indigenous peoples when trying to improve retention rates has been highlighted for students still in elementary school and high school as well (McRae, 2012). At an institutional level, Harris, Hill, and Kiernan (2012) argue that mentorship programs may not be successful unless academic programs shift away from being grounded predominantly in the Western paradigm. Our previous suggestion to make the time to discuss and then revisit the mentee's goals for the relationship is one concrete strategy to ensure the contact genuinely remains focused on the student's needs.

Second, as we reflected, it is important for mentors to focus on creating a safe and trusting environment between themselves and their mentee (Paasse & Adams, 2011). Safety and trust can be built in many ways. For example, at a micro level, educators can work on building of rapport, in part by increasing their awareness of the challenges that Indigenous students face (Carter, Hollinsworth, Raciti, & Gilbey, 2018). Safety and trust can also be created through macro changes such as the creation of institutional strategies that genuinely meet the needs of Indigenous students. For example, mentorship programs can be created that include educational strategies for students as well as an understanding of the structural factors that contribute to disadvantage (Aschenbrener & Johnson, 2017) and Indigenous curriculum can be included in classrooms in safe and meaningful ways (Burke, 2019; Wilson, McKinney, & Rapata-Hanning, 2011).

Finally, because research shows that, on its own, mentorship may not be enough for Indigenous students, educators could also consider finding additional ways to support Indigenous students and to disrupt Western educational assumptions. Indeed, many established, successful programs for Indigenous students involve more than just mentorship (Best & Stuart, 2014; Harris, Hill, & Kiernan, 2012). For example, in Australia, the Helping Hands program involves an orientation breakfast, a special area to help Indigenous students with enrolment, an Indigenous student relationship officer, individual tutors, a first year coordinator, support with clinical placements, an Indigenous nursing academic, helping students find academic and financial support, a student contact protocol to reach out to students when they are struggling, and Indigenous-specific recruitment materials (Best & Stuart, 2014).

Conclusion

This article has explored the relationship between a student and a faculty mentor; however, we fully acknowledge that with only 2.1% of post-secondary faculty in Canada self-identifying as being Indigenous, these educators are already over-tasked in their places of work and may not feel able to take on mentorship roles (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2010). Therefore, we encourage the exploration of mentorship by Indigenous peoples from all walks of life who are involved in education systems at all levels (i.e., Elders, community members, para-professionals).

In addition, we would like to encourage both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators to consider mentorship roles. Evidence suggests that Indigenous peoples may have the most success when they have Indigenous mentors (Australian Government Attorneys General's Department 2003; Warburton & Chambers 2007); however, it also suggests that there are benefits of having non-Indigenous mentors and that they may improve the sustainability of mentorship models as well as sending the message that supporting Indigenous students is not an Indigenous matter only to be dealt with by Indigenous educators, but a responsibility that is shared by everyone (Harris, Hill, and Kiernan, 2012).

Indeed, although this article has focused on one way that we can bring about change within larger, Western academic systems, we acknowledge that those structures are embedded in racism, oppression, and colonialism and much larger shifts are needed. Arguably, mentorship programs may not be needed at all if those systems were disrupted, the dominance of Western knowledge challenged, and institutions and programs of study became culturally inclusive to Indigenous students (Harris, Hill, & Kiernan, 2012). Until that occurs, it is our belief that mentorship can be one tool to use in making post-secondary institutions safer, more inclusive, more supportive places for Indigenous peoples.

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