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ARTICLE



Lasting impacts of an Aboriginal youth leadership retreat: a case study of Alberta's Future Leaders Program

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use a postcolonial lens to analyze the impacts of Aboriginal youth's participation in Alberta's Future Leaders Program's youth leadership retreat. While the retreat appeared to have positive lasting impacts on many of the participants, it seemed to have the greatest impact on those who already displayed Eurocentric leadership skills; it had little effect on those who did not display these skills prior to retreat participation and it focused on North American, Eurocentric approaches to leadership. By becoming more culturally relevant, we argue that the retreat could have broader impacts on a greater number of Aboriginal youth.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal; youth; Alberta's Future Leaders Program; outdoor education; leadership

To promote youth leadership, outdoor education programming has become a popular way to try to help youth who are deemed 'at-risk'; outdoor education programs are used to increase personal growth and development for those thought to be lacking in these areas (Cross, 2002; Ewert & McAvoy, 2000). Aboriginal (i.e. First Nations, Métis and Inuit) youth in Canada are frequently considered to be *at-risk* because of the challenging life circumstances they often face (Alberta Health Services, 2006; Correctional Service Canada, 2013; National Aboriginal Health Organization). Little is actually known about the benefits and impacts outdoor education programs have on Aboriginal youth.

Alberta's Future Leaders (AFL) Program is an Aboriginal youth development program through sport, recreation and the arts that has been operating in Alberta, Canada, since 1996. Each summer, the program hires and trains 'youth workers' and 'arts mentors' who are predominantly college and university students from urban centers across Canada, though mainly Alberta, to work in pairs on First Nations reserves and Métis settlements throughout Alberta. Leadership development is an integral component of the AFL's program. One of the responsibilities of the youth workers and arts mentors is to select Aboriginal youth as future leaders (or 'mentees') who volunteer with the program and then go on to participate in an outdoor education-based leadership development retreat. The mentees are chosen 'based on their high level of maturity, potential leadership abilities, and interest in staying active in their communities' (AFL Executive Final Report, 2011, p.13). The week-long retreat uses activity-based theory sessions, which are conducted in indoor class settings and focus on exploring leadership through completing personality profiles and learning about resolving conflict, group functioning and building people up. In the indoor class setting, the mentees participate in a series of theory-based sessions where guest lecturers discuss leadership, leadership development and other psychologically based principles. The mentees also complete self-esteem questionnaires to learn more about themselves (for more detail, please see BLINDED

FOR PUBLICATION, YEAR). The outdoor component of the retreat consists of a variety of outdoor activities such as spelunking, adventure hiking, rock climbing, caving, canoeing and a variety of challenging tasks that focus on working on teamwork (e.g. getting everyone over a wall), conflict resolution, creating a positive environment, communication and other leadership skills (Alberta's Future Leaders Program, 2011).

In this paper, we seek to explore the impacts—if any—that AFL's youth leadership retreat has had on its participants. Based on findings from semi-structured interviews and archival research, we identified two main themes: (1) the leadership retreat yielded positive long and short-term impacts on some of the mentees, and (2) the retreat is set up to provide opportunities for previously identified leaders who already display mainstream (i.e. Eurocentric, North American) leadership skills, which potentially calls AFL's stated goal of Aboriginal leadership development into question.

Review of literature

In order to situate our research within the existing body of evidence, in this review of literature, we will first provide background information concerning Aboriginal peoples in Alberta, with a focus on Aboriginal youth. Second, we will describe outdoor education programming for youth, specifically delving into how they can serve as significant life experiences and the impacts they can have on youth. Finally, we will examine the role of leadership development in outdoor education and the cultural dimensions of it.

Aboriginal peoples in Alberta

According to the 2011 National Household Survey, there are approximately 220,695 individuals living in Alberta who identified as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2012). More specifically, there are 116,670 people who identify as First Nation and 96,865 people who identify as Métis in Alberta (Windspeaker Staff, 2013). Approximately 28,675 Aboriginal people reside in Alberta's 2 largest cities, Calgary and Edmonton, with Edmonton having the second largest population of Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). Those who do not live in urban centers live either on First Nations reserves, Métis settlements or live in other urban/rural areas in Alberta (Alberta Health Services, 2006).

The Aboriginal population in Canada is younger than the non-Aboriginal population, with the median age being 27 years in 2006 for Canada in general (Statistics Canada, 2006). Children and youth make up a large proportion of the Aboriginal population, with 48% being younger than 24 years of age (Statistics Canada, 2006). In Alberta, over 52% of the First Nations population is under 25 (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Due to the legacy of colonialism, Aboriginal youth in Alberta face numerous challenges, including low rates of education completion (Public Safety Canada, 2012), high rates of incarceration (Correctional Service Canada, 2013), high rates of drug and alcohol abuse (National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO), 2011), exposure to gang warfare, violence, racism (Alberta Health Services, 2006) and high suicide rates (Public Safety Canada, 2012). All of these factors coalesce to result in Aboriginal youth in Alberta often being deemed to be *at-risk*. *At-risk* is a term that refers to youth who are brought up in a negative environment (negative household and negative neighborhood) and/or are perceived to lack the skills necessary for them to 'become responsible members of society' (Cross, 2002, p. 248). Outdoor education and adventure education programming, such as that offered at AFL's leadership retreat, have become increasingly popular in attempts to increase the well-being of *at-risk* youth.

Outdoor education

Over the years, there has been considerable scrutiny of definitions of outdoor education; as a result, it makes it difficult to pinpoint a single definition. Given the program under study, we chose to use a mainstream North American definition of the term. Thus, for the purposes of our

research, we consider outdoor education to be a holistic term used to describe educational activities with the specific philosophy of 'growth through challenge' that are done in natural environments (Neill, 2001; Wigglesworth, 2012). Outdoor education programs usually have a structured curriculum with the aim of delivering participation opportunities, not only to develop outdoor skills, knowledge and experience (Propst & Koesler, 1998) but also to make participants aware of personal positive change, enhance self-concept, improve leadership, improve social integration (Priest, 1999). Wattchow and Brown (2011) have noted that this focus on the individual can be understood as being a hallmark of capitalistic, Western society, where success is tied to effort and hard work and where structural and societal inequities are ignored, which leads to the marginalization of cultural dimensions of outdoor education experiences. Wattchow and Brown (2011) have also argued for the importance of considering place in outdoor education, given that it is conducted in an outdoor environment (Neill, 2001; Wigglesworth, 2012). We argue that attending to issues of place is especially important when working with Aboriginal youth, such as those who attend AFL's leadership retreat, given Aboriginal peoples' strong connection to the land and its fundamental role in Indigenous ways of knowing (Ritchie, Wabano, & Young, 2010). Viewing outdoor education as a chance to be within a particular place with which one may have cultural and familial links rather than in a natural environment that needs to be overcome and controlled in order to develop individualistic skills represents very differing approaches to outdoor education, the former of which is especially important when conducting outdoor education programs with Indigenous peoples.

Outdoor education programs have been found to have positive effects on a variety of different groups including persons with disabilities, girls and women, families, therapeutic groups, at-risk youth or youth with problem behaviors (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000). Nevertheless, there is a lack of strong evidence as to whether these programs have any long-term or lasting impacts on those who participate (Allen-Craig & Hartley, 2012; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997). Moreover, outdoor education programs are influenced by social hierarchies and increasing middle class prosperity, which further maintains a focus on Eurocentric, North American ideals (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Gassner and Russell (2008) noted, however, that the significance of an experience may not be clear at first and participants need time to fully understand the experience in order to see its usefulness. Participants also need time in order to gain an opportunity to be able to use the skills and knowledge learnt (Gassner & Russell, 2008) in order to see the potential benefit.

The identification of outdoor education programs as having the ability to promote Eurocentric, North American, individualistic, capitalistic values (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), when coupled with the lack of strong evidence on such programs' lasting impacts (Allen-Craig & Hartley, 2012; Hattie et al., 1997), raises the important question of whether an outdoor education leadership program like AFL, which is meant to be for Aboriginal youth, has the capacity to have lasting impacts on those who participate in it.

Significant life experiences and impacts of outdoor education programs

Several scholars have investigated the impacts of outdoor education programs for youth in general and university students and at-risk youth in particular (Daniel, 2007, 2005; Gass, 1999; Hattie et al., 1997; Whittington, 2011). Despite the lack of strong evidence, some have nevertheless found that these programs serve as significant life experiences (Hattie et al., 1997; Whittington, 2011). Significant life experiences are specific events in one's life that play important roles within one's day-to-day life (Daniel, 2007). Daniel (2005) identified numerous characteristics that enable programs to create important life experiences: the program causes mental, spiritual, physical, emotional or social change; the program is new; the program causes some sort of effect in the participant's future lifestyle; the program has some special meaning to it; or the program is significant to the participant due to its nature, timing or importance.

A number of studies have examined the long-term impacts of outdoor education programs, especially the popular program Outward Bound, an outdoor adventure education school (Gass, 1999; Hattie et al., 1997; Whittington, 2011). Essentially, the overall goal of Outward Bound is for participants to develop the potential to care for themselves, others, and the world around them through challenging experiences in unfamiliar settings. Hattie et al. (1997) and Gass (1999) both conducted studies on Outward Bound and found that positive impacts were still found 17–18 months after the program was finished. Similarly, Whittington (2011) researched the long-term impacts of a female (age 14–18) adventure program. When she interviewed the participants 6 and 18 months after the program, the participants reported that they still benefitted from the technical skills, self-confidence, communications and teamwork, and leadership skills that they acquired through the program.

Daniel's (2005) criteria for a significant life event provided us with measures to evaluate whether or not participation in AFL's leadership retreat had a long-term impact on Aboriginal youth participants.

Leadership development

A key component of outdoor education programs, generally, youth development leadership, can be defined as 'the provision of experiences, from highly structured to quite informal, that help young people develop [skills] that allow young people to lead others over the long-term' (MacNeil, 2006, p. 30). Leadership development is often considered to include a focus on decision making skills, communication skills, feedback skills, initiative awareness of the group and being aware of self (Sibthorp, Paisley, & Gookin, 2007). Those with increased leadership abilities gained through specific leadership experiences (e.g. outdoor education programs) may be more likely to participate in leadership positions in the future and transfer what they have learned onto others (Allen-Craig & Hartley, 2012).

It is important to note, however, that the majority of outdoor education leadership programs that aim to improve leadership abilities focus on those who are already believed to have leadership skills and have potential to increase these abilities (Hattie et al., 1997). It is also important to note that many youth development programs assume that leadership is a universal phenomenon (Galipeau, 2012) and thus fail to appreciate the cultural differences that can be apparent in approaches to leadership. In a program like AFL that focuses on developing Aboriginal youth's leadership through outdoor education, an understanding of the role of culture in leadership is of utmost importance.

Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal leadership

Leadership and what is considered leadership differ from culture to culture. A traditional Eurocentric, North American definition of leadership 'combin[es] ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) with authority (voice, influence, and decision making power) to positively influence and impact diverse individuals, organizations, and communities' (MacNeil, 2006, p. 29). This definition, however, is culturally constrained and reflects traditional Eurocentric, North American ideas of leadership, which tend to emphasize an individual having power over subordinates to gain an objective (Blinded for review, year).

Aboriginal leaders, on the other hand, tend to serve those they lead rather than command them (Redpath & Nielsen, 2009). Aboriginal leaders often discuss issues with their associates before making decisions and treat them with respect and as equals. Unlike traditional Eurocentric, North American approaches to leadership, which are more autocratic in nature, Aboriginal approaches to leadership tend to be more egalitarian (Julien, Wright, & Zinni, 2010; Redpath & Nielsen, 2009). As a result, while distinct, Aboriginal styles of leadership nevertheless share commonalities with servant

leadership (Carpenter, Bauer, & Erdogan, 2010), democratic leadership (Cherry, 2014a) and transformational leadership Cherry (2014b).

An example of an outdoor adventure leadership training program is Wikwemikong Outdoor Adventure Leadership experience (OALE) (Ritchie et al., 2009). OALE, a youth leadership training program for Aboriginal youth, involved six training modules developed with collaboration between Wikwemikong Leaders and Laurentian University researchers over 3 years (Ritchie et al., 2010). The 10-day-long canoe trip in the wilderness focused on three main goals: preparing Aboriginal youth as leaders, promoting culture and community and protecting youth through resiliency, and well-being (Ritchie et al., 2010). Each youth was able to take on leading the group for a period of time, during which time s/he had to make decisions and thus develop and use leadership skills and learn how to better work as part of a team (Ritchie et al., 2010). Importantly, these goals focused on issues that were particularly salient for Aboriginal youth and the training was respectful of Aboriginal culture and community.

Despite evidence from OALE (Ritchie et al., 2010), there remains very little research on other outdoor education leadership programs involving Aboriginal youth in Canada and whether or not these programs yield positive and long-term results for participants. The research below addresses this gap by focusing on the voices of Aboriginal mentees and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth workers/arts mentors and the impacts they believed youth participants experienced through participation in AFL's youth leadership retreat.

Theoretical framework

Scholarly examinations of the impact of colonialism on the colonized are often conducted through a postcolonial theoretical lens. Postcolonial theory can be defined as a 'theoretical construct used to understand society after independence from colonial domination' (McEwan, 2009, p. 59). Those who adopt this theory use it in a number of ways and iterations to explain how colonialism and its historical structures still inform the present. Loomba (2005) asserted that one should think of postcolonialism as 'the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism' (p.16).

Today, colonialism can still be seen in issues of authenticity and legitimacy (Huggan, 2001). For example, there is a struggle over what constitutes 'legitimate' knowledge within the academic world (Smith, 1999). As a result, postcolonial scholars often adopt one of three main strategies: (1) challenging the dominant discourses of imperialism that reflect the Western world, (2) challenging the way of speaking and writing that homogenizes those who have been colonized and (3) recovering the voices of those who have been marginalized and dominated (McEwan, 2009). In order to recover the voices of the marginalized, the mentees who participated in the AFL program were interviewed for them to express for themselves how they felt about the youth leadership retreat and the impacts it had—if any.

Methodology

A case study is a research tool or strategy that is used to investigate a specific event or case within a naturally occurring setting (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Stake, 2005). It is used in research to answer 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions about the chosen topic, whether it be an activity, social phenomenon or program (Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) identified three kinds of case studies: descriptive, explanatory, exploratory case studies, all of which can focus on single or multiple cases. A single case study occurs when there is only one case being studied, as opposed to a multiple case study where there can be more than one case that is investigated and compared (Yin, 1994).

For our research, AFL program was the case under study and we used an exploratory approach. Exploratory case studies use 'what' questions with the aim to look more deeply at a situation and to create hypotheses and propositions for future research. Gagnon (2010) stated that an exploratory case study 'deals with a subject that is clearly important but has previously been neglected for

various reasons' (p. 15). What long-term impacts, if any, a leadership retreat can have on Aboriginal youth has not yet received scholarly attention. As such, we believe an exploratory case study methodology that was informed by postcolonial theory was most fitting to uncover the impacts the leadership retreat had on past Aboriginal youth participants.

Methods

The methods that we employed were archival research and semi-structured interviews. Conducting archival research provided us with detailed background information on AFL and aided us in gaining better insight into the interviewees' experiences. We gained access to the end-of-summer reports by youth workers and arts mentors from the years 2001 to 2011, which enabled us to achieve a better understanding of AFL and the youth retreat. Nevertheless, these reports were produced for the organization and thus are most likely edited versions that omit important details. Along with the end-of-summer reports, AFL staff members also provided us with the official AFL annual reports from 2001 to 2011.

In addition to archival research, we also employed semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We used snowball sampling to locate research participants (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). We were able to interview five former mentees, all of whom participated in AFL in different years. Initially, we had hoped to conduct interviews with a minimum of 10 former mentees who had participated in the youth leadership retreat prior to 2008 to understand the impacts the youth retreat had on their lives. We had a great deal of difficulty in identifying past mentees who were willing to be interviewed; we thus had to broaden the time limit. In total, we attempted to contact 30 former mentees; however, only 5 replied, all of whom agreed to be interviewed.

The greatest difficulty we encountered in attempting to interview a larger number of former Aboriginal mentees was our difficulty in locating them. Indeed, Corrado and Cohen (2011) have pointed out that many Aboriginal youth have a great deal of residential and geographic mobility, which makes their lives quite transient in nature (Corrado & Cohen, 2013). One such factor is transitioning from reserve life to urban life in order to find employment, housing, education or health services that are not available in their home communities (Gilchrist, 1995). Corrado and Cohen (2011) found that one quarter of Aboriginal youth had moved at least once in the past 12 months, and those aged 5–24 years have moved at least once in the past 5 years. When trying to locate former mentees, we found that many no longer were connected to their old phone numbers, nor were they living in their former community.

Because we did not want to rely on data from only five participants, we decided to also interview past youth workers and arts mentors about their views of the impacts that the retreat had on the mentees' lives. Each summer, the youth workers and arts mentors work closely with the mentees, and they accompany them to the leadership retreat, which occurs midway through the summer. As a result, the youth workers and arts mentors have the opportunity to see if short-term changes occur after the leadership retreat. Some youth workers and arts mentors stayed in touch with their mentees over the years, which gave them the ability to provide insight into whether or not the short-term impacts they saw yielded long-term effects. To locate past youth workers and arts mentors, we once again used snowball sampling.

Once the research subjects agreed to participate, we received their contact information and sent e-mails that included the consent form and additional information on the interview process. The first author conducted 21 interviews, 2 of which were in person and the remainder over the phone because the participants were scattered across Canada. Out of the 21 interviews, 15 were conducted with former youth workers, 1 was conducted with a former arts mentor and 5 were with Aboriginal youth who had been chosen to go to the youth retreat.

The 15 youth workers and 1 arts mentor worked for the program between the years 1999 and 2008. There were seven participants who were Aboriginal and nine non-Aboriginal. Four out of the 16 were male. The former mentees (three female and two male) were all Aboriginal, came from a

variety of communities across Alberta and participated in the retreat between the years 2002 and 2010.

Mentees, youth workers and the arts mentor were asked a variety of questions pertaining to the youth leadership retreat and its potential impacts, if any. Questions for the mentees specifically delved into what they remembered from the retreat and whether or not they believed that participation in the retreat had any immediate or long-term impacts on their lives. When interviewing the youth workers and arts mentor, we focused more specifically on what they observed at the retreat from the mentees they selected to attend, what they recalled from talking with their mentees at and after the retreat, subsequent behavior changes they witnessed, if any, and what they knew about the mentees' lives today. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were provided with a copy of their transcripts. Each participant had a deadline of 2 weeks after which s/he was asked to send back the transcripts with any changes or feedback. Only four interviewees sent their transcripts back, all with minor changes.

Participants were given the option of using their real names. Increasingly, there is recognition of the importance of acknowledging Aboriginal people's knowledge and expertise as legitimate and in need of recognition (see *Blinded for Review*, Year). As such, the consent form offered participants the opportunity to have their names used in the publication if they so desired, and it outlined risks and benefits. As such, participants' names (first names or full names) appear with permission.

Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyze the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews and the documents sent to us by AFL for the archival research. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as a 'method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (p. 79). It can be used not only to describe data sets in detail but also to interpret specific facets of the topic chosen for research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. In the first phase, once the data have been collected, the researchers immersed themselves in the data in order to become familiar and comfortable with it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We did this by the first author transcribing the semi-structured interviews herself. Both authors then read the data multiple times, which helped to increase our familiarity with it. The second phase involved producing the initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To identify initial codes, we went through the interviews while highlighting emerging patterns and coming up with headings that fit the initial patterns, such as 'short-term impacts', 'long-term impacts', 'negative impacts' and 'reasons for being chosen'.

For the third phase, researchers analyzed and combined the specific codes to form main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, we reviewed the validity of each individual theme by assessing if it fits the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Through our analysis, we identified two main themes: (1) the leadership retreat had some positive long-term and short-term impact on the mentees and (2) the retreat is set up to provide opportunities for those who are already identified as leader. Similarly, we also identified subthemes within the larger themes such as 'building personal networks', 'positive behavior change and changes in self-esteem', encouraged youth to go on to 'bigger things', 'positive role models', 'resilience and making an effort', 'potentially benefit community afterwards', 'limited impacts' and 'lack of consideration of Aboriginal culture'.

Positive impacts on mentees

We found that the mentees we interviewed all felt that the leadership retreat had positive impacts on them. This finding was echoed by the youth workers and arts mentor, who—in both interviews and written reports—reported that the leadership retreat was of benefit to many of the mentees. The benefits that were identified included building personal networks, facilitating positive behavior change and encouraging the youth to go on to ‘bigger’ things.

Building personal networks

Many of the mentees believed that the leadership retreat was important in the creation of personal networks. The mentees reported that they were able to meet other Aboriginal youth around their age who were facing similar situations and hardships. Gerald Laboucan, a former Aboriginal mentee from Driftpile First Nation who participated in 2010, stated that the leadership retreat helped to

build a network of socialization.... So they [mentees] get to meet all these other youth just like them from small communities. From First Nation, Aboriginal communities and they get to build a network.... So it definitely helps building that networking and support system from people their own age and people that are going through what they're going through at that exact same moment. (personal communication, 20 February 2014)

Similarly, within the Executive Final Reports, there were a number of quotes that illustrated the importance the leadership retreat played in terms of developing friendships.

At the leadership retreat, the mentees were often able to meet up with old friends and reestablish past networks. A mentee from East Prairie who participated in 2002, Courtney Patenaude, affirmed,

it was a great opportunity to meet with other AFL leaders because one of the leaders that I met was an old friend from my elementary years. She had moved away from East Prairie and she ended up being a leader in her community. So it was good to reconnect with her and see her again and talk to her. (personal communication, 12 February 2014)

Whether it was reconnecting with former friends or making new ones, the mentees identified the positive impact that the retreat had on making these connections.

These networks were not only short term in nature. Gerald reported:

What stands out most for me ... would be just relationships I have with all of them. Like one of the mentors, for example, in the earlier years is now one of my closest friends. We talk every day, we go on vacations together, a whole bunch of fun stuff. So I guess the biggest thing would be I guess the relationships that I got to develop from this. (personal communication, 20 February 2014)

Positive behavior change and changes in self-confidence

The leadership retreat had an impact on some of the mentees' behaviors and self-confidence. Byron Utinowatum, a 2006 mentee from Tall Cree First Nation, believed that the retreat allowed him to be able to open up and not be shy: 'I was in such a small place for such a long time that I'd just never talk to strangers ... but when I was there, it was like, okay. It kind of freed me' (personal communication, 6 March 2014). Gerald noted that his participation in the retreat led to long-term impacts that enabled him to let others lead and become better at being part of a team. He stated,

it gave me a new outlook on life. The biggest challenge I think I faced there was I'm kind of a control person.... It really helped me let go and challenge myself in that way with trusting other people ... [in] running programs and taking the lead. So it really helped my team building skills as a leader, but also as a team member. (personal communication, 20 February 2014)

In the Executive Final Report from 2001, another youth noted that the retreat helped him realize that teamwork is the best way to get through tough situations. He said, 'Working as a team is the best thing when large obstacle[s] are in the way' (AFL Executive Final Report, 2001, p. 17).

Another benefit that the participants identified was that the opportunity to participate in new activities increased their levels of self-confidence. Darcy Lindberg, a former coordinator of AFL who was also a youth worker in 2001 and 2002, noted: 'It's incredible ... especially for people who aren't fit and don't think they can do this and they get pushed up that mountain by the whole group and then they achieve it and I think it's something they'll always remember' (personal communication, 1 February 2014). Such was the case for Courtney, who remembered being nervous climbing over a tall wall during an activity:

I remember we had to get everyone up and over this wall and I felt that I wouldn't be able to get up and over because I'm heavier and bigger than everyone but they managed to pull me up anyways. So that helped with my self-esteem. (personal communication, 12 February 2014)

Another youth cited in the Executive Final Report for 2001 identified that participation in the retreat increased his confidence: 'I did things that I didn't think I was capable of doing. That is why I think it was one of the finest and most helpful experiences that I have ever participated in' (AFL Executive Final Report, 2005, p. 15). Courtney, another mentee, felt that the activities at the retreat were 'an inspiration—things might seem difficult at first, but with the right direction and leadership you can overcome any obstacle' (personal communication, 12 February 2014). She stated that she carries this view today.

Encouraged youth to go on to 'bigger' things

Another important positive impact of the leadership retreat that the participants cited was that it inspired the mentees to either attend school, leave the community or to develop a career focus. Nadine McRee, a former youth worker who worked in Tall Cree First Nation in 2002, stated, 'most of them [the mentees] have graduated [from high school]. The ones that I selected, they've all ... gone on to some form of other education or got a job. They're all doing well.... They're still giving back to their community' (personal communication, 27 February 2014).

For Holly Seniantha's, a 2007 mentee from Assumption-Chateh, the retreat inspired her to want to work with youth in the future. She explained,

I guess it made me want to work with youth.... It opened up an opportunity there for me to become involved with youth. I'm involved with children [now]. I want to work with children and youth. So that was kind of like a stepping-stone for me. (personal communication, 20 February 2014)

Chelsea Moore, a former youth worker who worked in Assumption-Chateh in 2007 and 2008, stayed in touch with the mentees she chose and knew what types of jobs they went into after the retreat. She mentioned that one of her mentees had become a social worker, while another has 'got three kids now. She runs a daycare in the community, so maybe not leadership, but working with youth. So I think that's pretty cool' (personal communication, 15 November 2013).

Rachel Rose, a former youth worker who worked in Bushe River First Nation in 2002 and Siksika First Nation in 2003 who was also a former coordinator of the program, mentioned how one of the mentees she selected left her home community to get a better education immediately after the retreat.

We came back from the leadership retreat and I wanted to go check up on her a couple of days later. I remember I went to check in with her and I was like, 'where is she?' And they were like, 'she's gone.'... She went to Edmonton to go finish her high school year with her aunt that lives there because there's a better school. (personal communication, 17 December 2013)

There were many success stories with the youth who attended the retreat; however, that may be a reflection the type of person typically selected to attend it.

Leaders are chosen to attend

To select mentees, the former youth workers and arts mentor reported that they asked community members for input and would also use their own experiences with the youth to make the decision.

There were specific characteristics and attitudes that youth workers and arts mentor looked for when deciding whom to choose: Positive role models, well connected youth, resilient youth, youth making an effort and youth that could potentially serve the community afterward.

Positive role models

A key characteristic that was sought was youth who were positive role models. Indeed, many of the youth who were selected already had jobs or were well connected to their community. Julie Mouris, a youth worker who worked in Heart Lake First Nation in 2008, felt that the two she chose were excellent choices. She stated,

we settled on these two guys. One [was] the guy who was teaching phys. ed. cause the kids just looked up to him so much and we thought it was really great that he was one of the only youth in the community (personal communication, 29 October 2013).

Similarly, Tara Connolly, a youth worker who worked in Conklin, Alberta, in 2007, explained that she selected someone who 'was a very positive role model in that community to some extent. He had a job, he worked on the rig, and he was making money' (personal communication, 5 December 2013). In both instances, the mentees chosen were deemed to be good role models because they were employed.

Resilience and making an effort

There were also a variety of other characteristics that were deemed important in finding mentees to attend the retreat. Resilient youth and those making an effort to help with or attend programming were other important characteristics. One youth worker explained, 'resilient youth ... that's definitely a characteristic of the ones that went from Sucker Creek' (anonymous, personal communication, 31 January 2014). Chelsea noted that she selected 'the kids that were coming out to the program and were helping me on a regular basis. So those who I saw as leaders in the community and who I felt would really benefit from the training' (personal communication, 15 November 2013).

Potentially benefit community afterward

Another reason why many of the mentees were chosen was because they were seen to have the potential to serve their community after the retreat. Stephanie Cressman, a youth worker who worked in Beaver First Nation in 2007, felt that it was important to choose youth who were

really interested in building up their leadership skills and taking part in their community in the leadership role. Hopefully someday those ... mentees will be [band] councilors in their community and ... being mentees will really be beneficial for them in those roles. (personal communication, 22 October 2014)

Similarly, Nadine explained that she chose her mentees because they were 'willing to continue on with the skills that they had gained to bring back to the community' (personal communication, 27 February 2014). Within the Executive Final Reports, a number of youth provided statements of what they were going to bring back to their communities after participating in the retreat. For example, one youth mentioned that he/she would like to 'try and be involved with the younger youth and help them be involved' (AFL Executive Final Report, 2002, p. 15). Another stated, 'I know that I can be a great role model to the little kids and to my little sister' (AFL Executive Final Report, 2003, p. 15).

Limited impacts

The goal of the retreat is that it is intended to present 'an opportunity to affect positively the lives of the Aboriginal youth who have attended ... while having fun' (Alberta's Future Leaders Program, 2001, p. 13). The overall purpose of the retreat is to

develop the whole person (i.e. values, attitudes, and personal skills), ensure willful, conscious, and positive change in the mentees participating, and begin to build tool for the mentees to be able to apply and transfer the knowledge, skills, and information learned at the retreat. (Alberta's Future Leaders Program, 2011, p. 13)

While, certainly, some of the mentees credited the leadership retreat as having a positive impact on their life, there were others that the retreat did not reach. Just as the success stories seem to be related to the characteristics of the individuals invited to attend, the limited impacts also seem to be related to characteristics of some of the attendees. Rachel Rose, stated,

there was this notion that they [mentees] should be this squeaky clean leader from the community that is ready to be the new youth worker and ready to do that sort of thing. That was difficult to find and the way that that leadership retreat was built and designed was for that type of leader. It was for these people that are coming in with all these tremendous capacities and just need that extra little push to become the new lovely youth worker. But who was actually showing up sometimes were kids from gangs. We had lots of conversations like, 'should we be letting these people in?' Sometimes we would bring them to the training and we were like, 'this training is not suited for them.' ... So the intended reality ... is that these are people that you identify in the community and then they do this training and ... then you support them to become leaders in their community. The reality of it is that it's difficult to find appropriate people for this program. (personal communication, 17 December 2013)

Other youth workers questioned the retreat's and program's effectiveness:

When you look at, okay, what was the effect of what we did? Like it can really go either way, right? Ya so [a mentee] I would say is successful and this other guy came to this horrible end that was untimely. (Julie Mouris, personal communication, 29 October 2013)

Similarly, Tara felt that although most of the mentees she did bring on the retreat were great, there was one with which she had a specific problem:

Some of the kids that I ended up going to the camp with were fantastic and really enjoyed themselves. However, one of them slept in and never attended anything. It was a fight every day to get him out. I was exhausted working with him. (personal communication, 5 December 2013)

Many of the youth workers and the arts mentors did not stay in touch or know what happened to the mentees after the retreat. In one former youth worker's case, she did find out what happened to one who she felt had potential:

I hope that some of the youth that we worked with throughout AFL specifically went on to succeed in whatever they wanted to do. Unfortunately, I do have a sad story about one of the youth. One of my first youth that we brought [to the leadership retreat] is in jail. (anonymous, personal communication, 20 January 2014)

Lack of consideration of Aboriginal culture and leadership

One of the prominent reasons the youth workers and arts mentor identified for what they felt was the retreat's limited impacts related to its lack of consideration of Aboriginal culture and leadership. Rachel noted, 'The classroom component I found to be very regimented and very structured and not very respectful for a lot of the places where those youth have come from ... that whole piece needs to look really different' (personal communication, 7 December 2013). Chelsea argued that the retreat and the AFL program in general were "white driven" if that makes sense. I know it's terrible to say' (personal communication, 15 November 2013). Ryan Adams, an Aboriginal man who worked as a youth worker, stated succinctly, 'the program is not couched in Indigenous philosophies. It's couched in mainstream' (personal communication, 22 October 2013).

Discussion

The results illustrate that AFL's youth leadership retreat appeared to have some positive impacts on the Aboriginal mentees chosen to participate in the program; nevertheless, despite these benefits, we argue that the retreat would be better positioned to meet its goals if it made a departure from

its traditional Eurocentric, North American leadership focus. After discussing our findings, we thus offer some recommendations on how the retreat could be made to be culturally relevant for Aboriginal youth, which may enhance the likelihood of its success with Aboriginal mentees.

Positive impacts on mentees

As shown in the results, the youth retreat had a number of benefits for the Aboriginal mentees who took part. The retreat might have been even more significant; however, if sense of place had been emphasized at the retreat, as Aboriginal peoples are often more connected to the land and wilderness than non-Aboriginal peoples (Ritchie et al., 2010). Stories of origin and how the world came to be in Aboriginal teachings involve deep connections with the earth and provide Aboriginal peoples with consciousness of their own existence and anchor them to a geographical location (Chartrand, 2010). These stories and teachings provide a sense of place and create stronger foundations in one's culture (Chartrand, 2010). Further, traditional teachings are important for Aboriginal youth to help youth engage with and become acquainted with their own specific cultures and to orient them to connect with their family and community. Rather than focusing on self-esteem inventories, which are very individualistic in nature, the retreat could be improved by enabling the youth to develop a sense of place that connects to their culture and examining the ways in which they can become leaders for challenging the structural and social inequities that they face. Having Aboriginal staff at the retreat would also likely make a large contribution to making the retreat less Eurocentric, North American in its approach.

Despite these shortcomings, 5–7 years after participating in the leadership retreat, the mentees we interviewed described experiencing long-term impacts from the retreat. Hattie et al. (1997) conducted a meta-analysis and proposed that a long-term impact of a program can be defined by any effects still visible 18 months after program completion. The impacts identified by the mentees were consistent with meeting Daniel's (2005) criteria of a significant life event. By enhancing the mentees' personal networks, improving self-esteem and self-confidence, and encouraging them to pursue new directions, the retreat had profound impacts on the former mentees that we interviewed.

While AFL's youth leadership retreat served as a significant life event for the mentees we interviewed, a potential confounding issue is that many of those who were chosen to attend the leadership retreat were identified by the youth workers and arts mentors as having leadership skills that were consistent with traditional Eurocentric, North American, approaches to leadership. Thus, they experienced success in that setting. Those who utilized less autocratic Aboriginal leadership skills were potentially not selected to participate in the retreat or could have been amongst those for whom the retreat was deemed to be a poor fit. Indeed, the youth workers and arts mentors identified these issues themselves and, as a result, their assessments of the retreat's impacts were more guarded.

We suggest that the program could be strengthened by focusing on Aboriginal teachings that can be used to promote Aboriginal approaches to leadership. Teaching such as respecting elders, respecting nature, respecting others, having love for children, providing for family, having knowledge of language and wisdom and honoring spirituality (Barnhardt, 2008) align with contemporary approaches to outdoor education that value a sense of place (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), as well as less autocratic approaches to leadership, such as servant leadership (Carpenter et al., 2010), democratic leadership (Cherry, 2014a) and transformational leadership (Cherry, 2014b). While the issue was not brought up by participants themselves, ensuring that knowledgeable Aboriginal Elders are invited to share their knowledge at the retreat would also help to promote culturally appropriate approaches to leadership.

Conclusion

AFL's youth leadership retreat had a lasting impact on certain Aboriginal mentees who attended the retreat, though predominantly those who already displayed traditional, Eurocentric, North

American leadership skills. Thus, while the goal of developing some Aboriginal leaders might have been achieved, it may have come at the expense of failing to recognize, select or connect with those who displayed or sought other, more culturally appropriate forms of leadership. Further, it comes at the expense of making efforts to recognize, promote and preserve Aboriginal culture.

Certainly, given the dominance of Eurocanadian cultural practices throughout Canada, having Aboriginal youth learn or reaffirm, Eurocentric, North American leadership skills may serve a strategic purpose in helping them to more successfully navigate settings that are steeped in colonial relations of power (e.g. education, health care, government). Nevertheless, such an approach does little to challenge the existing status quo and serves to marginalize Aboriginal culture. By engaging in an outdoor education approach that privileges and celebrates Aboriginal forms of leadership and sense of place, there might be a better opportunity for AFL to develop more future leaders who are better able to represent and lead their communities in ways that are culturally relevant and thus effective.

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