RURAL SCHOOL INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND STUDENT

MENTORSHIP: SUPPORTING STUDENTS AFFECTED BY A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

by

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Abstract

Principals are responsible for overseeing the academic achievement of students in their charge, despite any difficult situations. Although maintaining a high standard of education within a global pandemic such as COVID-19 has been a new challenge for Canadian principals, worldwide many disasters have interrupted formal schooling in recent history. Research indicates that school leaders must be prepared to deal with an increase in student mental health concerns and potentially lowered levels of academic achievement. This capstone provides a literature review of student responses to environmental disasters, investigating the use of various types of student mentorship to address escalating mental health concerns due to isolation in a quarantine situation. Chapter 3 includes recommendations for implementing a successful student mentorship program to support and positively affect student academic achievement in a small rural Albertan community K–12 school with limited resources.

Keywords: mentorship, youth, academic engagement, mental health, coronavirus, COVID-19

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

School principals must balance policy directives, legislation, and ethics in fulfilling their many responsibilities to the school community. In addition to providing instructional leadership, under the Education Act of Alberta, they must also "provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging" (Education Act, 2012, p. 132). Furthermore, Alberta Education's (2018a) *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS) requires a school leader to understand and respond to "the larger societal context" (p. 7). This mandate currently includes the repercussions of the societal response to the coronavirus pandemic, including implementation of quarantine protocols and suspension of services such as face-to-face classes in schools. Citizens have encountered challenges and endured hardships as the world shifted to remote learning, the economy stalled, and people were isolated from their loved ones, seemingly overnight ("Generation coronavirus?," 2020). As governments attempt to control the spread of COVID-19 and its variants by implementing varying degrees of lockdown measures, citizens have not been given much reprieve from the stress of navigating ever-changing restrictions on all aspects of life.

Background Information and Statement of the Problem

School principals apply their leadership knowledge to provide an optimal learning experience for all school students (Alberta Education, 2018a, 2019). Designing a school program to optimize student engagement is likely to have a minimal positive effect unless the basic

psychological needs of students are first met (Saeki & Quirk, 2015). When students' basic psychological needs are met at school, they will be more hopeful and resilient, leading to increased academic success (Carmona-Halty et al., 2019). Mental health, a component of adolescent health, "is a significant predictor of subsequent academic success" (Hale & Viner, 2018, p. 469).

Albertan school leaders, recognizing the importance of supporting all aspects of student well-being, provide many supports to students and curriculum delivery by following the Comprehensive School Health approach (Alberta Health Services, 2017). However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many services schools provided were withdrawn from students by April 2020 ("Generation coronavirus?," 2020), leaving the schools and families scrambling to adjust to a new way of life. In addition, there has been concern that the "COVID19 pandemic may worsen existing mental health problems and lead to more cases among children and adolescents because of the unique combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession" (Golberstein et al., 2020, para. 3; see also Jones et al., 2021).

When the school buildings closed in March 2020, Alberta Education Minister LaGrange (2020) informed Albertan parents that student learning would continue. Schools would work with families to ensure student progression to the next grade level whenever possible. School divisions were allowed flexibility in the implementation of at-home learning within the time constraints identified. Society generally accepted and rose to the uncharted challenges of remote learning despite the anxiety felt by teachers, parents, and students (Onyema et al., 2020). A school re-entry plan presented three different scenarios for the operation of schools beginning in September 2020, ranging from returning to normal operations to the continuation of remote learning (Alberta Education, 2020a). As the coronavirus pandemic has progressed, the education

community has continued to switch between multiple scenarios while attempting to allay the fears and anxiety of the school community.

In an ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the education community is trying to determine how best to engage students academically while addressing an expected deficiency in social-emotional needs during the school year. Research has shown that "the relation between students' engagement and social-emotional/behavioral functioning was mediated by the extent that their basic psychological needs were met" (Saeki & Quirk, 2015, p. 364). It is then necessary to address the basic psychological needs of students (e.g., the feeling of belonging) and the continuation of student learning. In a survey of 3,300 adolescents (America's Promise Alliance, 2020), 29% reported feeling disconnected from their school community due to the disruption of the coronavirus. The challenge for a school leader is to devise a plan to address diverse student learning needs while providing emotional support to rejuvenate the feeling of connection for students.

Some of the legislation governing education and youth in Alberta include but are not limited to the Education Act (2012), the Ministerial Order on Student Learning (Government of Alberta, Department of Education, 2020), *TQS* (Alberta Education, 2018b), *LQS* (Alberta Education, 2018a), and the Children First Act (2013). The Children First Act of Alberta section 2.2 states:

a) that all children are to be treated with dignity and respect regardless of their circumstances;

b) that a child's familial, cultural, social and religious heritage is to be recognized and respected;

c) that the needs of children are a central focus in the design and delivery of programs and services affecting children;

d) that prevention and early intervention are fundamental in addressing social challenges affecting children;

e) while reinforcing and without in any way derogating from the primary responsibility of parents, guardians and families for their children, that individuals, families, community and governments have a shared responsibility for the well-being, safety, security, education and health of children. (2013, p. 3)

This legislation is significant in understanding why it is essential to develop regional, culturally relevant programming.

Mentoring is a natural part of daily human life, with youth taking advice from adults and peers in their lives (Church-Duplessis, 2020; Smith, 2017). Research has indicated that at-risk youth involved in mentoring partnerships experienced increased academic success and valued the program's relationships with mentors and peers (Weiss et al., 2019). "Mentors can serve as additional sources of support and guidance" (Schenk et al., 2020, p. 149) to students lacking a solid or diverse support network. A school leader who can implement a successful mentorship program would be taking a proactive approach to increasing student academic engagement while building student relationships and increasing their sense of belonging. How a rural school leader could increase students' academic engagement by developing a successful mentorship program with limited resources is the focus of this project.

Purpose of the Study

School communities are grieving the loss of many things since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and desperately seek reconnection (Carrington, 2020; Silver, 2020).

Mentoring can be described as a "powerful way of lending support to a young person by teaching skills, listening to their perspectives and creating a sense of belonging" (Alberta Mentoring Partnership [AMP], n.d.-b, Why is mentoring important section, para. 1). Implementing a rural mentorship program, benefitting both mentees and mentors, could play a critical role in increasing student academic engagement through relationship building. The purpose of this capstone is to assist rural school leaders with the development and implementation of an effective school-based student mentorship program.

Research Question

The focus of this capstone is to address the question: How can a rural school leader effectively implement a school-based mentorship program to support students affected by a global pandemic?

Significance of the Study

Mental health is something that all humans, young and old alike, have in common. The public health measures of the mandated lockdown of society and travel restrictions have been stressful for many families for various reasons, leaving more families to cope with adverse conditions (M. Douglas et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). Students who experience ongoing stress and uncertainty due to a public health pandemic are at higher risk of adverse mental health effects and would benefit from mental health "supports specifically targeted to adolescents following disaster" (M. R. G. Brown et al., 2019, p. 9). A school community that supports student resilience enables youth "to adjust constructively to a range of challenges" (Theroen, 2016, p. 91), including adverse family effects (AFEs). Research has shown that children having an excess of two AFEs may be less resilient and more inclined to academic disengagement (Kasehagen et al., 2017).

When students return to school after having been out of the classroom for extended periods, schools see the summer holiday–type regression of student well-being due to extended periods of loneliness, food insecurity, and reduced physical activity ("Generation coronavirus?," 2020; Morgan et al., 2019). The school community is responsible for dealing with students' emotional well-being as a precursor to learning. Research suggests that students are most ready to engage in academics when their basic needs, such as belonging or hunger, are met (Edwards & Shipman, 2018; Hale & Viner, 2018; Kasehagen et al., 2017). A visionary rural school principal would create a plan for best facilitating students' return to school, including providing opportunities to promote student social interaction. The plan would be a driving force in adhering to the vision for students to be, in the words of one rural school district, "resilient, compassionate, and active learners engaged in their communities" (Clearview Public Schools, 2019, p. 8).

Outline of Remainder of Paper

Chapter 2 includes a review of relevant literature investigating programs and practices relevant to youth mentorship in rural settings. Chapter 3 provides recommendations for rural school leaders to consider in the process of implementing a school-based youth mentorship program.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Psychological distress is a natural human response to a pandemic (Silver, 2020), particularly among those who lack social support or experience economic hardship (Stewart-Ibarra et al., 2017). The isolation and uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected all youth differently, leaving few unscathed. Those from lower socioeconomic brackets may not feel the loss of travel or the latest technology; instead, they may experience heightened food insecurity if they cannot access school nutrition programs. The youth from higher socioeconomic brackets might be dealing with the liquidation of material assets, restriction in travel and purchases, or moving. Particularly in rural communities with few recreational buildings, students often develop a place attachment to the school as it is a hub for education, socialization, and sport. Students' inability to access the school disrupts this place attachment and can "diminish well-being in children and youth" (Scannell et al., 2016, p. 165). For many students struggling with feeling alone, mentorship is one way to connect with another human. As Carrington (2019) stated, "Connection before direction" (p. 118) is necessary to open the path to learning for vulnerable students.

Definition of Terms

Adverse family effects (AFEs): Refers to "divorce/separation of parents; family income hardships, substance use problems; and mental illness, suicidality, or severe depression" (Kasehagen et al., 2017, p. 298). The existence of AFEs is important, not the reason for them.

Alberta Mentoring Partnership (AMP): Refers to "a network of community mentoring agencies, government, and youth working together to raise the profile of mentoring in Alberta" (AMP, n.d.-a, para. 1).

Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF): Refers to a nonpartisan national nonprofit society formed to "contribute to the revitalization and sustainability of rural Canada through collaborative research" (CRRF, n.d. para. 1).

Complex trauma: Refers to "the dual problem of children's exposure to traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on immediate and long-term outcomes" (Cook et al., 2003, p. 5).

COVID-19: Refers to the 2019 novel coronavirus disease (World Health Organization, 2020).

Cultural intelligence: Refers to "the capability to relate and work effectively in culturally diverse situations" (Cultural Intelligence Center, n.d., para. 1).

Executive function: Refers to cognitive processes required for learning, including "the flexible control of attention, the ability to hold information through working memory, and the ability to maintain inhibitory control" (Raver & Blair, 2016, p. 95).

Historical trauma: Refers to transgenerational effects where "traumatic events endured by communities negatively impact on individual lives in ways that result in future problems for their descendants" (Kirmayer et al., 2014, p. 307).

Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program: Refers to a communal-led program, originating in Winnipeg, Manitoba, incorporating "Indigenous values aimed at the promotion of healthy lifestyles in children and youth" (Ferguson et al., 2021, p. 733).

Mentorship: Refers to "social interactions in which nonparental adults or older peers without advanced professional training provide guidance and other forms of support to youth that is intended to benefit one or more areas of their development" (DuBois & Karcher, 2014, p. 3).

Place attachment: Refers to the often subconscious sense of belonging in a physical space, especially important to adolescents who may not have solid social attachments (Dallago et al., 2018).

Posttraumatic growth: Refers to "where a person learns from a traumatic experience" (Andrades et al., 2018, p. 1507).

Principal: Refers to "a teacher designated as a principal or acting principal under [the Education Act]" (Alberta Education, 2019, p. 13).

Rural: Refers to "a small population in a large geographical area—generally areas with no town center over 10 000 people and not adjacent to urban areas" (Rogers & Leitch, n.d., p. 8).

Teen mentoring: Refers to "the relationship between a caring, more experienced individual and a less experienced person resulting in the provision of support, friendship, and constructive role-modelling consistently over a period of time" (AMP, n.d.-c, p. 3).

Theoretical Framework

Rural school leaders, often teaching principals, deal with the repercussions of "a lack of access to facilities and resources for educational programming, opportunities and services" (Wallin et al., 2019, p. 26) daily. In preparation for an increased need for student social-emotional support during the coronavirus pandemic, Alberta Education (2020) has recommended that schools have a plan to deal with student mental health concerns, supported by funding from the "Student Wellness Program Allocation" (p. 19). Adolescents perceiving emotional support may experience numerous benefits, such as "weaker performance-avoidance goals, lower test anxiety, and higher academic achievement" (Song et al., 2015, p. 837). Inadequacy in services, such as provision of mentorship programs, exists in underpopulated rural Albertan communities due to geographical distance from urban centers (Schiff et al., 2016). Additionally, school-based

youth mentoring programs might be more effective than community-based programs in positively affecting academic engagement (Raposa et al., 2019). However, many community mentorship programs are designed for an urban context, lacking the background to identify with the dynamics of the rural way of life, such as "informal social control" (Dupéré et al., 2019, p. 2).

Review of Research Literature

Mentorship of Students

Although some student populations may benefit more than others from mentorship, all partners potentially have something to gain. Typically, the primary purpose of any mentorship program is for an expected benefit to the mentee. Depending on the program's focus, the projected benefit may range from reducing risky behaviors, such as substance abuse, to providing social-emotional support (L. Douglas et al., 2018). In fact, "youth with mentors are more likely to report engaging in positive behavior" (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014, p. 2). In the case of disrupted place attachment, "social bonds may assist young people with the repair or formation of new place bonds" (Scannell et al., 2016, p. 167).

Government-mandated gathering restrictions have changed how youth interact, ultimately reducing social contact with peers and possibly enhancing the isolation of marginalized youth. This restriction to movement, combined with interrupted in-school learning, has resulted in many youth being "isolated from caring adults other than family members" (America's Promise Alliance, 2020, p. 3). At the same time, youth are becoming increasingly concerned about their health and prospects for themselves and their family (America's Promise Alliance, 2020). The many challenges faced by young people in challenging circumstances present an opportunity for

posttraumatic growth, if dealt with accordingly (Andrades et al., 2018). Putting the social

disconnection felt by many youths into perspective, Brokenleg (1998) stated:

> Many children have broken circles, and the fault line usually starts with damaged
>
> relationships. . . . Guarded, lonely, and distrustful, they live in despair or strike out in
>
> rage. Families, schools, and youth organizations are being challenged to form new
>
> "tribes" for all of our children so there will be not "psychological orphans." (p. 132)

An effective mentorship program would provide youth with much-needed social contact,

increasing their resiliency to navigate the uncertainty of a health pandemic.

The Rural Context and Diverse Cultures

Students around the world have been impacted by COVID-19, some more than others. A

study conducted by America's Promise Alliance (2020) revealed that "students in rural

communities report feeling less connected to their school communities than students in cities,

towns, or suburbs" (p. 3). As each community is unique, rural settings have different

opportunities and challenges than their urban counterparts. For example, there is a perceived lack

of anonymity in rural Canadian communities; residents are often hesitant to access local health

services for fear of their privacy being breached. Rural development planning, to be feasible,

must consider both statistical data and unique local stories (CRRF, 2019). The ways families are

affected by infrastructure, transportation, employment, and the environment are different for

rural families than they are for those in an urban context. The "cultural heritage" (CRRF, 2019,

p. 42) of a rural community, including "self-sufficiency and independence" (CRRF, 2019, p. 46),

must be considered during any program development within the community, including in the

schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted family dynamics through reduced job security and restricted access to services, among other challenges. Some of those challenges fall across gender lines. For example, "females residing in rural areas appear to be experiencing detrimental changes to health behaviours, particularly those living with children" (Glenister et al., 2021, p. 9). "Rural men are less likely than urban men and women to access mental health services" (Creighton et al., 2017a, p. 1883). Before the pandemic, many rural citizens had to find work away from home, often leaving one parent alone to raise the family and manage the property. In a study about challenges faced by rural men before the pandemic, Creighton et al. (2017a) stated:

> [One participant] spoke about the remoteness and often "brutal" work condition in the oil fields and how workers were isolated from friends and family for long periods of time, "He [family member] would work incredibly long hours and days and days in a row and then come back for a break so dirty and tired that he was almost unrecognizable." (p. 1885)

Before the lockdowns, many rural Albertan families were already in stressful situations due to the downturn in the economy. The pandemic has now forced many families to function differently, and rural parents might not be able to adequately support the youth in their care due to the challenges faced during this stressful time.

Students who grow up in rural agricultural communities are often given much responsibility at a young age (Stoneman & Jinnah, 2017). Youth raised on farms, generally expected to help with day-to-day operations, are given responsibilities such as caring for livestock, running farm machinery, and operating all-terrain vehicles (Elliot et al., 2018). This early responsibility may be associated with higher risk-taking activities than their urban peers (Pickett et al., 2017). Rural male youth are particularly at risk of unattended mental illness and

suicide, often engaging in risky behavior contrary to personal beliefs in response to an unspoken

pressure to portray a solid masculine persona (Creighton et al., 2017b).

In the wide-open spaces of rural Canada, there is little space for male youth to deviate

openly from the traditional masculine norms. It would be a resilient individual who could openly

embrace their true self and not internalize their insecurities about belonging to a diverse culture

(Creighton et al., 2017b). Adolescents living in rural areas are at particular risk of social

exclusion if they do not fit into the dominant local culture. Such informal social control exists

because peers usually interact with the same people in the school and community (Dupéré et al.,

2019). With the cultural pressure placed on these young men, they must have a confidential

forum for conversation, such as mentoring, to feel comfortable delving into issues affecting their

state of mind. Although mentoring is not counseling, the partnership may provide a beginning to

a path of attaining or maintaining good mental health.

Of the many subcultures living in rural Canada, the Indigenous population deserves

consideration. Statistics Canada (2017) indicated that at the time of the 2016 Census, 1,673,780

Aboriginal people lived in Canada, accounting for 4.9% of the population, and 58.9% of those

respondents indicated residing in either rural or small (population of 1,000–29,999)

communities. Aboriginal youth aged 14 or under accounted for 26.8% of the total First Nations,

Métis, and Inuit population, totalling approximately 26,292 youth. In a meta-analysis entitled

"Residential Schools and the Effects on Indigenous Health and Well-Being in Canada—A

Scoping Review" (Wilk et al., 2017), the most commonly reported aspect of historical trauma

included the effects on "mental and emotional well-being" (p. 18). A prudent Alberta school

leader would consider the effects of historical trauma in light of the fifth competency of the *LQS*,

"Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4)

The success of a mentoring partnership largely depends on the relationship between a mentor and mentee. Mentors have been found to be more satisfied with the relationship when they are culturally competent (Suffrin et al., 2016), increasing the chances of success for the mentoring program or youth empowerment program (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016). A clearly defined and targeted focus is necessary to assess the effectiveness of such a mentorship program (Christensen et al., 2020). Program development requires that school leaders consider diverse cultures and lifestyles for maximum effect and understand "that policies, practices, and interventions imposed on rural cultures are not necessarily 'helpful' even if our intention is to help" (CRRF, 2019, p. 46).

Cross-Age Peer Mentorship Compared to Tutoring

Identifying the fundamental purpose of a mentorship program as either relationship building or skills enhancing is paramount to planning and evaluating a program. A recommendation in the *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* is that an effective program will involve regularly scheduled meetings over a set length of time (DuBois & Karcher, 2014). Additionally, Karcher (2014) has indicated that a mentorship program should focus on youth development by cultivating a close relationship between the mentor and mentee. Activities should be incorporated to allow the mentee to experience "empathy, praise, and attention from the mentor" (Karcher, 2014, p. 233). Alternatively, when the activities serve a remedial purpose to address skills deficiency, the relationship transitions to tutorial than mentorship.

Matching a mentor with a mentee must be done with careful consideration. as a mentoring relationship that ends early "may actually be detrimental" (Lerner et al., 2014, p. 11).

The benefactor of a mentoring relationship is not only the mentee but also the mentor (Coyne-Foresi & Nowicki, 2021; Nabors et al., 2019), according to Riessman's (1965) helper therapy principle, where some children benefit more from helping others than receiving help themselves. In this respect, an actual cross-age peer mentorship program is a beneficial addition to any school's positive youth development (PYD) program, preparing youth "to be resilient to the challenges they may face" (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 1166). In addition, the partnership formed in the mentoring process promotes a sense of belonging and personal significance. According to Brokenleg's (1998) theory of youth development concerning the Native American Circle of Courage, the foundation of youth development is a sense of belonging. This theory aligns directly with Coopersmith's (1969) research on developing high self-esteem, showing that "acceptance—expressed by warmth, interest and concern for the individual's well-being by persons significant to him" (p. 2)—is one of three foundational conditions (alongside clearly defined expectations for performance and respectful treatment of individuals).

Adult–Youth Mentorship

A mentoring relationship between a youth and a nonparental adult, such as a teacher or community member, may exist naturally or be created formally. The foundation for the relationship may vary, but the benefits of such a relationship are similar: A "mentoring relationship can become a 'corrective experience' for youth who have experienced unsatisfactory relationships with parents or other caregivers" (Kanchewa et al., 2018, p. 1081). Kanchewa et al. (2018) stated that many youth recommended for mentoring exhibit some level of rejection sensitivity that could potentially be reduced through positive experiences with mentors who are cognizant of the mentee's experience with rejection. In classrooms where teachers are

emotionally supportive, adolescents experience increased engagement and motivation (Ruzek et al., 2016).

It is of utmost importance to identify the true purpose of the mentorship program, as research has indicated that "structured mentoring relationships tended to provide more academic support . . . [whereas] informal mentoring relationships tend to support personal development" (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014, p. 4). Given that formal mentoring requires more resources than natural mentoring, a prudent school leader would take steps to "strengthen the 'relational capacity' of the everyday settings of youth and foster opportunities for natural mentoring relationships to occur" (Van Dam et al., 2018, p. 213). Mentorship program development should also consider that "at-risk youth are simultaneously more likely to have academic struggles and less likely to have naturally occurring mentors" (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014, p. 4). This likelihood may necessitate the implementation of a formal mentoring program dependent on community volunteers.

Selecting a Community-Based or School-Based Program

Preceding the implementation of a mentorship program is program development. A program suited to the community can potentially arise from adapting one or more of the mentorship programs analyzed herein. Presented forthwith is a literature review considering the efficacy of several long-standing mentorship programs and their adaptability and relevancy to the rural context.

Community-Based Mentorship Programs

A meta-analysis study regarding the effectiveness of mentoring programs showed that mentees experienced "a number of positive results including noticeable improvements in academic, behavioral, psychological, and social outcomes among mentored versus non-mentored

youth" (DeWit et al., 2017, p. 50). In the same study, the researchers suggested that the benefits

mentioned above occurred in the presence of the following mentor behaviors:

(1) Model effective communication and pro-social behavior helping youth cope with

environmental stressors and regulate emotions;

(2) provide secure attachments allowing youth to explore their surroundings and develop

positive expectations of interpersonal relationships;

(3) improve youths' feelings of self-worth through positive feedback; and

(4) offer youth new experiences allowing for the discovery of abilities from which to

construct their sense of self. (DeWit et al., 2017, p. 50)

"When activities that integrate skill-building opportunities and active participation occur

in the presence of positive and supportive adult–youth relations, positive development will

occur" (Lerner et al., 2014, p. 10). Even though many community-supported youth programs

exist, access may be difficult for rural youth. Therefore, this study considers several already-

established mentorship programs available to rural Canadian youth.

Big Brothers and Big Sisters Canada. Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Canada (BBBS)

serves over 1,100 communities nationwide, though typically in more prominent, less rural

centers. The agency is self-described as having "over 105 years of experience in creating,

nurturing and empowering life-changing relationships for children and youth who face

adversity" (BBBS, n.d.-a, para. 2). In addition, the agency boasts of offering one-to-one and

group mentoring opportunities at the community level and one-to-one mentoring at the school

level. In their analysis of BBBS, DeWit et al. (2017) indicated that "BBBS one-to-one mentoring

may have positive effects on the mental health of Aboriginal (AB) youth and may in fact be

more beneficial to AB than non-AB youth, particularly in regard to decreasing emotional and

anxiety difficulties" (pp. 63–64). An in-school mentoring program (BBBS, n.d.-b) would be appropriate for a school leader to access if within the catchment area of a functioning BBBS agency.

      4-H Canada. According to its website, in Canada, 4-H membership exceeds 23,500 youth aged 6 to 25 (4-H Canada, n.d.-a, para. 1). Each province is responsible for overseeing community-based clubs in its region. With the mission "to empower youth to be responsible, caring and contributing leaders that effect positive change in the world around them" (4-H Canada, n.d.-a, Our Mission section, para. 1), 4-H clubs exist in many Canadian communities, with programs delivered by professionals and volunteers through school, community clubs, and camps (4-H Canada, n.d.-b). Research has shown that "the structured out-of-school time, learning, leadership experiences, and adult mentoring that young people receive through their participation in 4-H plays a vital role in helping them achieve success" (Lerner & Lerner, 2013, p. ii). Additional research indicates a strong correlation between youths' sense of purpose and accessing mentors as a resource provided by the 4-H program (Burrow et al., 2020).

      All activities in 4-H's PYD model aim to achieve six key outcomes: positive values, responsibility, skill mastery, leadership development, planning and decision making, and a sense of purpose (4-H Learns, n.d.-a). Considering the four leadership development pillars of 4-H, which are (a) Community Engagement & Communications, (b) Science & Technology, (c) Environment & Healthy Living, and (d) Sustainable Agriculture & Food Security (4-H Canada, n.d.-b), making connections to school curriculum should not be challenging. Furthermore, with mentorship in 4-H coming from both volunteer leaders and other members, integrating or implementing a school-based 4-H program is a feasible option for a school leader.

Alberta Mentoring Partnership. The AMP organization, created in 2008, works to "build the capacity of school and agency partners to deliver great mentorship programming" by "providing access to mentoring resources and toolkits, training materials, and research" (AMP, n.d.-a, para. 2). Alberta high school students can earn up to five credits in Career and Technology Studies upon successfully completing any of the five single-credit mentoring courses (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 5). This substantive online resource supports mentorship of diverse cultures and programs in varying stages of development, bridging school and community programs. The vision of the organization has morphed from "every child or youth who needs a mentor has access to a mentor" in 2014 (O'Neill et al., 2016, p. 144) to "young people thrive through mentoring relationships" (AMP, n.d.-a, Our Vision section, para. 1). Both versions of the vision statement indicate the importance that the organization places on mentorship. Continued partnership and funding by the Alberta government and the private sector denote that the program is successful and deemed necessary (O'Neill et al., 2016). Everything that a school leader would require to set up a mentorship program in their school is available amongst the resources available through AMP, including but not limited to curriculum, lesson plans, and toolkits.

Youth Empowerment Program. Trauma is an integral part of the human experience and is very personalized. The uncertainty and societal changes arising from the COVID-19 pandemic may be a source of trauma, particularly for already vulnerable youth (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). Students experiencing AFEs may be predisposed to lower levels of executive function and may have difficulty remaining "cognitively reflective, calm, and focused" (Raver & Blair, 2016, p. 105), and those attributes are necessary for academic engagement. Such students may often be unsatisfied with typical mentorship experiences due to program access barriers (Raposa et al.,

2016). Raver and Blair (2016) stated that students benefit from trauma-focused programs by focusing attention on learning. Youth are at increased risk of experiencing complex trauma when denied access to the social safety net afforded by the school environment (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). The cost of such trauma to school-age youth "may be measured in medical costs, mental health utilization, societal cost, and psychological toll on its victims" (Cook et al., 2003, p. 5). Youth empowerment programs may be a catalyst in counteracting the feelings of vulnerability and disempowerment of these at-risk students by building capacity (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016).

In a study of four youth empowerment program models, Jennings et al. (2006) identified six key components critical to their effective development:

- A welcoming, safe environment;

- Meaningful participation and engagement;

- Equitable power-sharing between youths and adults;

- Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes;

- Participation in socio-political processes to effect change; and

- Integrated individual- and community-level empowerment. (p. 41)

Jennings et al. (2006) noted benefits to the youth as having "increased self-efficacy and self-awareness as well as positive identity development" (p. 51). Youth program participants benefit from adult guidance while developing leadership skills in similar empowerment programs.

School-Based Mentorship Programs

Although many mentoring relationships develop outside of the school context, with family, friends, and neighbours, in some instances this process is not naturally occurring. Where youth do not have access to these naturally occurring relationships, the school provides an

excellent opportunity for more formal connections to be made. Mentors meet regularly with the mentees at school, eliminating the need for youth to be at school during nonoperational hours.

Depending on circumstances and available resources, a mentorship program may be one-on-one (a dyad) or a group setting. A study by Schwartz and Rhodes (2016) showed that "most formal mentoring is still characterized in terms of one-on-one relationships between youth in underserved communities and middle-class (most often White and female) volunteers from outside their communities" (p. 151). It is imperative to engage more male mentors "to offer perspectives on their own experiences, to provide direction, and to give other men the permission to speak up" (Creighton et al., 2017a, p. 1889). The quality of mentor–mentee relationships plays a prominent role in the effectiveness and satisfaction of the mentorship program. Clear, timely conversations between mentor and mentee regarding scheduling changes or cancellations can mitigate the mentee's feelings of rejection (Kanchewa et al., 2018), which can cause tension in the relationship. Allowing youth to nominate their mentor from their current social network follows a "Youth Initiated Mentoring" (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016, p. 154) approach. Upon agreement, the mentor would undergo training, and the mentorship would begin, possibly with a better chance of success than a randomly paired mentor.

Program Delivery Options

It is advisable to minimize the barriers to access while maximizing resources to optimize the positive effect of any mentorship program. *The State of Mentoring in Canada* reported that 15% of programs combined one-to-one and group mentoring (Church-Duplessis & Rae, 2021, p. 11). Typically, few mentorship programs are offered virtually, with the norm being in-person meetings (Church-Duplessis & Rae, 2021). Therefore, the merits of alternative strategies deserve

consideration in a situation where participants experience challenges in attending face-to-face meetings.

Electronic or Digital Delivery

Electronic or digital delivery of mentorship (e-mentoring) programs make use of the latest advances in technology using devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones to connect mentors and mentees (Church-Duplessis, 2020). Participants make contact through the internet using one or more agreed-upon strategies, including but not limited to email, instant messaging, and voice or video calling (Culpepper et al., 2015). This connection helps youth to feel less isolated by increasing social supports and building social capital (Church-Duplessis, 2020; Radlick et al., 2020).

Implementation of this strategy, effective in reducing barriers to mentorship (Church-Duplessis, 2020; Culpepper et al., 2015; Kaufman, 2017), such as language, regional availability, and a shortage of mentors, is not without its challenges. For example, all participants must have reliable access to and "technical support for the technology and digital platform" (Kaufman, 2017, p. 5) as an underlying condition for entry into the mentorship program. Research has shown regional disparity of digital access (Church-Duplessis, 2020; Creasy, 2017), where "for many [Canadian] rural households, connectivity is a major concern not only during a crisis, but also to support daily activities" (Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology, 2019, p. 12). Additionally, "electronic communication lacks the visual and audible cues that people are often dependent on for clear communication" (Culpepper et al., 2015, p. 17). When in-person mentoring is unavailable, however, e-mentoring is a suitable alternative to nothing at all (Radlick et al., 2020).

Blending In-Person and Digital Delivery

A blended program uses more than one method for program delivery. For example, before the COVID-19 pandemic, only 1% of mentoring programs in Canada operated solely online. However, a small number of programs shifted to a hybrid model, offering both in-person and online options, in response to the pandemic (Church-Duplessis & Rae, 2021). Church-Duplessis (2020) proposed a framework to support the transition from in-person mentoring to e-mentoring:

a) Outline how to achieve the program's goals and structure in a digital environment, including training requirements and monitoring processes.

b) Select digital tools that support the program and participants can manage.

c) Clarify expectations and instructions for meetings, communication, and activities taking place in a digital environment. More details may be required than anticipated.

d) Plan to maintain confidentiality and evaluate the program in a digital environment. (p. 12)

A blended delivery option is an effective way to ensure that a mentorship program remains in effect during the transition between in-school and at-home learning, when "students are seeking ways to connect and socialize in manners that may not be productive for optimal health" (Jones et al., 2021, p. 2476).

Leadership Practices

Rural community members may be apprehensive of change due to a cultural and historical attachment to their community (Preston et al., 2013). A rural school principal "is in an ideal position to know every student and parent" (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 9). These relationships create trust and social capital within the community, positively influencing

education stakeholders to embrace program change or implementation (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

The need for a rural school principal to adjust their leadership style may be situationally

dependent (Bush, 2018).

Culturally Responsive Leadership

The intermingling of people and cultures expands the diversity of any population,

including rural Canadian communities. Alberta teachers and school leaders are mandated to

teach in a nondiscriminatory manner (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2018) and required to be

lifelong learners by both the *TQS* (Alberta Education, 2018b) and *LQS* (Alberta Education,

2018a). To ensure efficacy, school leaders need to develop their cultural intelligence (Livermore,

2011). This awareness of one's worldview will impact how any school leader will develop and

implement school programming.

Rural Canadian communities are becoming increasingly diverse, with more and more

people leaving urban life in favor of the perceived benefits of living in a small community

(Spicer et al., 2021). Statistics Canada (2017) reported that 18.7% and 12.7% of Canadians live

in rural and small communities, respectively. Many family incomes in these regions are

dependent on agriculture or are resource-based and require a parent to be away for extended

periods (Creighton et al., 2017). These families' lifestyles create yet another subculture to be

considered on top of the more obvious religious and ethnic diverse cultures. "As population

demographics continuously shift, so too must the leadership practices and school contexts that

respond to the needs" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274) created by these changes.

Taking inventory of the needs and investment capital of all involved parties using a

systems thinking (Orr, 2016) approach can ensure that any program used will meet the expressed

needs of the partners. A collaborative environment may be conducive to the quick identification

of all stakeholders involved in the education and potential mentorship system (Kouzes et al., 2012). Cooperrider's (2012) appreciative inquiry strategy takes a cyclic approach involving four development stages:

      1) Discovery of assets or appreciating what exists in the current system;

      2) Dream or envision the positive impact of a sustainable change;

      3) Design or plan to create the ideal situation to achieve the vision of stage two; and

      4) Destiny or assessment of the current plan serves as motivation to begin the cycle again to improve the program.

An effective, culturally responsive leader will keep in mind that "leadership is about relationships, about credibility, and about what you *do*" (Kouzes et al., 2012, p. 338). Particularly in a rural school, it is necessary for the principal, a "change agent" (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 10), to endorse the implementation of cultural responsiveness to avoid the program being "disjointed or short-lived in a school" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274).

Distributed Leadership

As with their urban counterparts, rural school leaders are expected to deliver a high-quality education to students, often with reduced human and financial resources. This reality necessitates that an effective rural school leader utilizes a "style of leadership reliant on teamwork" (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 8). An effective leader realizes that without a team to lead, they are not a leader. In *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes et al. (2007) stated:

Trusting leaders nurture openness, involvement, personal satisfaction, and high levels of commitment to excellence. They are willing to ante up first in the game of trust, they listen and learn from others, and they demonstrate their trust by sharing information and resources with others. (p. 227)

In this aspect, a school principal may adopt a distributed leadership style to foster trust and allow others to lead programs effectively (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016).

In their study of mentoring relationship quality, Kanchewa et al. (2018) concluded that "by increasing the number of caring adults in schools with whom students can build close relationships, particularly for students who may demonstrate some relational challenge, schools could foster a wide range of positive youth outcomes" (p. 1095). A cohesive educational community involves many leaders, some of whom are students and community volunteers. An effective school-based mentorship program requires the support of these leaders while developing further leadership skills in the participants.

Impact of Mentoring Partnerships

A program may have positive and negative effects, and as such it should be implemented only when the positives outweigh the negatives. Research has shown mentorship to be an effective "intervention strategy for promoting positive youth development; that is, mentoring can be successful in a diversity of program designs" (Haddock et al., 2020, p. 1879), particularly in programs designed for a specific or targeted purpose (Christensen et al., 2020).Haddock et al. (2020) found a slight advantage to pairing mentors and mentees within small-group mentorship models, indicating that a school-based small-group mentoring program may be as effective as one-on-one mentoring. Research by Marino et al. (2020) indicated that mentoring may effectively maintain or improve school connectedness, which typically reduces over time, particularly during students' transitions between elementary, middle, and high school.

It would be idealistic to presume that any program or relationship is not without its flaws. Negative experiences can be minimized with a proactive rather than reactive planning process. Early identification of circumstances to be avoided is a prudent practice. "Early relationship

termination is an important challenge for mentoring programs" (Church-Duplessis & Rae, 2021, p. 12), potentially negatively impacting the participants and limiting program impact. This challenge is particularly salient given because "the longer the mentoring relationship lasts, the greater the value for youth" (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014, p. 3). Substantial resource investment into all stages of the mentoring process "from recruiting and screening, to matching, training, and monitoring and supporting mentors and mentees" (Church-Duplessis & Rae, 2021, p. 12) will assist in maintaining clear communication of program expectations. Research by Church-Duplessis and Rae (2021) outlined several challenges to be aware of in addition to program sustainability and funding:

　　　　1) Mentor recruitment;

　　　　2) Parent/family engagement;

　　　　3) Mentor training (including curriculum development);

　　　　4) Integrating cultural perspectives in service design and delivery;

　　　　5) Developing meaningful activities for mentors and youth;

　　　　6) Applying critical mentoring principles to the program;

　　　　7) Integrating Indigenous perspectives in service design and delivery. (p. 15)

Summary

　　　　An underlying premise of youth mentorship is PYD. Until the early 2000s, PYD was a deficit-based model relying on the absence of risky behaviors (Lerner et al., 2014). However, the modernized model of PYD is rooted in the theory that "every young person has the potential for successful, healthy development and that all youth possess the capacity for positive development" (Lerner et al., 2014, p. 4). In *The Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, Lerner et al.

(2014) described "the five C's of positive youth development" (p. 5) for mentors to cultivate in

mentees:

- Competence—A positive view of one's actions in specific areas, including social,

  academic, cognitive, health, and vocational.

- Confidence—An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy.

- Connection—Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in

  exchanges between the individual and his or her peers, family, school, and

  community in which both parties contribute to the relationship.

- Character—Respect for societal and cultural norms, possession of standards for

  correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity.

- Caring/Compassion—A sense of sympathy and empathy for others. (p. 5)

As these five characteristics develop, youth will begin contributing positively to society

over time, which Lerner et al. (2014) considered being a sixth C. They proposed that PYD and

successful mentorship are not mutually exclusive; one cannot exist without the other. If adopting

a mentorship program seems to be an insurmountable task, adjusting current program delivery to

take a mentorship approach may be a suitable alternative.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this capstone project was to identify how a rural school leader could effectively implement a school-based mentorship program to support students affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Given that "the process of learning is as important as the context of learning" (Couture & Murgatroyd, 2012, p. 222), educators must know more than just curriculum delivery, including youth development and government legislation. In addition, during this formative time, when youth may be struggling with self-identity, participating in a mentorship or youth empowerment program may give them a sense of purpose (Jennings et al., 2006).

Chapter 1 provided evidence that societal reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted students' mental health. The restrictions and transitions between in-person and at-home learning have reduced connections amongst partners in the education community. This disconnect is particularly concerning as students are not necessarily equipped with the resources to be resilient in these circumstances, especially those with pre-existing mental health conditions or AFEs (Jones et al., 2021). Youth development is already a complex entity, during which youth are figuring out who they are, without the added uncertainty that accompanies a pandemic.

Chapter 2 described specific challenges faced by diverse cultures in rural communities. For example, the pandemic exacerbated the disparity in access to health and technology services in rural areas. Additionally, youth who felt isolated and unable to seek help due to the rural self-sufficiency mentality before the pandemic were further disconnected. Finally, the literature review in Chapter 2 explored various effective programs and delivery strategies for youth

mentorship, different from tutoring. Empowerment and PYD programs positively affect youth self-efficacy. School-based mentorship programs offer several advantages over community-based programs, including increased access to and retention of mentors, and therefore, increased program sustainability (Haddock et al., 2020). As program development requires a significant investment of resources, including time and money, school leaders must consider program sustainability in the process.

Implications

The research included in the literature review indicates that the education community should be concerned about the state of student mental health during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government of Alberta (n.d.) has supported the mandate for Alberta schools to offer some sort of mental health support with accessible online resources. School leaders must respond to and support the sometimes-fragile state of student mental health. Many educators, myself included, already responsible for educating the student beyond the scope of curriculum, are feeling further weighed down by this increased responsibility for students' well-being. The development of an effective mentorship program rooted in PYD would support students and relieve a portion of this extra burden from school staff. A well-developed program would offer benefits to all students, not just those who are struggling. The positive effect of such a program would extend to the students' homes, possibly making students more resilient to AFEs, deeming it an essential program in the eyes of the community.

Recommendations

The following recommendations will guide rural school leaders in selecting or developing a mentorship program that effectively supports students affected by the global pandemic.

Conduct an Asset and Deficiency Assessment

The first recommendation is for rural school leaders to take an accurate inventory of the school community. A committee could use a systems thinking (Orr, 2016) approach to determine stakeholders, student and community needs, and assets; such an inventory would ensure culturally responsive program development. Combining this approach with an appreciative inquiry strategy (Cooperrider, 2012) would focus the assessment on the community's strengths rather than its deficits. In the process of assessing current programs in the community, stakeholders could compare the merits of expanding those programs to a school-based format, with the possibility of implementing a new program. It may be easier to adapt or combine elements of other programs to fit the rural context.

Choose Program Components

The second recommendation is to access ready-to-use implementation and training modules, such as AMP, to guide the development of a targeted (Christensen et al., 2020) and culturally relevant (Ferguson et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016) program. Finally, PYD at its foundation should incorporate the four components of the Native American Circle of Courage for youth development: "belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity" (Brokenleg, 1998, p. 131). In addition, research has shown that best practices for PYD through "process-oriented models of youth mentoring" (DeWit et al., 2017, p. 50), such as 4-H, include (a) using similar interests to match mentors and mentees, (b) varying activities during weekly contact over an extended time, (c) developing trust between the participants, and (d) providing support to community Elders serving as mentors.

As access to programming is a common barrier to mentorship, particularly in rural areas, the design of a mentorship program must make accommodations. A further recommendation is to

follow a research-based framework (Chong et al., 2020) if e-mentoring is a viable option. In addition, a culturally responsive school leader will recognize the advantages of implementing a blended program with in-person and electronic components.

Suggested Research for the Future

Further research addressing the rural perspective on mentorship and youth education in diverse cultures in Canada is needed to expand upon that which is currently available. Specifically, research to focus on the efficacy of programs explicitly designed to address the needs of rural youth, including strategies to attract and retain mentors in a resource-challenged community, would be valuable.

Conclusions

School leaders, mandated by various pieces of legislation, including the Alberta *LQS* (Alberta Education, 2018a), must "[ensure] that every student has access to quality teaching and optimum learning experiences" (p. 6). Additionally, their actions must indicate an appropriate response "to the political, social, economic, legal and cultural contexts impacting schools and the school authority" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 7). Preston and Barnes (2017) stated:

> Successful rural principals are efficient at balancing local expectations and the educational vision of the centralized school district. These principals understand how local, district, and nationwide contexts influence the rural school and respond in ways that are both place-conscious and mandate responsive. (p. 10)

Rural school leaders must support their students in dealing with the rural mentality of "if you're not tough you don't deserve to be here—that kind of mentality that only the tough survive" (Creighton et al., 2017a, p. 1887). The literature review indicates that mentoring, whether it is community or school-based, can be used effectively for various purposes. Until the

particulars of a school community are known, only general recommendations are appropriate. Youth mentorship is a beginning step in spreading the message to rural community members to connect youth with others to get the support they need. Once youth are familiar with self-empowerment and making connections with others, they will have a solid foundation on which to base their resilience. Mentorship is a robust empowerment tool; in the words of B. Brown (2010), "Connection is why we're here; it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives" (3:10).

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