

More Than Words Mentoring Webinar



By Sonia Bucan

On June 25, 2020, the *More Than Words* and *Networks4Change* team convened a webinar titled *A Conversation on Mentoring with Indigenous Girls and Young Women*. This webinar was hosted over Zoom, and brought together over 40 participants from all over Canada and South Africa. The webinar aimed to discuss different approaches to mentoring and provide a space for fruitful discussions about critical issues to pursue in follow-up work.

We had initially planned these conversations to take place face-to-face over 5 days in Durban, South Africa at the Imbizo Intergenerational, June 29-July 3, 2020. As a follow-up to the *Circles Within Circles* gathering held at Montebello in July, 2018, Imbizo Intergenerational was meant to support the collective voices of Indigenous girls and young women. Over 60 individuals from across Canada including 40 Indigenous youth participants were preparing to travel to South Africa and connect up with 40 more researchers, community scholars, activists and youth members in Durban. This was a remarkable opportunity for Indigenous girls and young women from across Canada and South Africa to come together to continue their work of addressing the impact of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) through community-based workshops and youth-to-youth mentoring.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for us to go ahead with Imbizo Intergenerational and the event will be postponed to 2021. In the meantime we explored other activities and ways to connect up remotely. In this effort, we held the Conversation on Mentoring online using Zoom. However, like most online meeting platforms, Zoom privileges some voices over others due to the necessity for up-to-date technology and reliable Internet connection. With acknowledgement of this inequity, we moved forward and a panel was held featuring partners from Treaty 6, Rankin Inlet, Eskasoni, and our South African partners from *Networks4Change*.

Welcome & Opening

The webinar began with Marjorie Beaucage inviting ancestors in to guide the conversation and thank them for their knowledge. Marjorie evoked the image of a circle to draw attention to the power of creating equal spaces for listening and learning, speaking to how there is no one way to properly engage in mentorship and thinking about how the circle can expand and contract.

The Panel

The moderator for the panel was Liz Cooper from the University of Regina.

Treaty 6

The panel began with a presentation from Treaty 6 by Jenn Altenberg, Kalan Kakum McKay, and Tegan McKay. They discussed the importance of Aunties to the Young Indigenous Women's Utopia group. They use the term Nikawak, which translates into "little moms". They emphasized the important role Aunties play in supporting and guiding young girls through life. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult for the girls to be there for each other in-person, but they have been able to stay in touch through their group chat which remains extremely active.

Eskasoni

Linda Liebenberg provided an update on mentoring in Eskasoni. Linda noted that in Eskasoni, they primarily use a community and cultural mentorship model. Drawing from the idea of the blanket toss game from the North, Linda spoke to the importance of supporting the youth, making them feel safe as they explore for themselves, and welcoming their ideas in the community. Like in the blanket toss game, the youth in Eskasoni are lifted to see what is out there, and then brought back to bring new ideas and perspectives into the community. The group has also found that coming together in the form of a workshop or retreat has worked well. From all of the different projects that have taken place in Eskasoni, the young people have

developed many different skills, and this growth of skills has allowed for peer-to-peer mentoring. When new youth come into the project, the ones who have participated in previous projects are able to take on a mentorship role.

South Africa

Relebohile Moletsane and Lisa Wiebesiek followed with a discussion of how they are taking up mentoring at the South African sites attached to *Networks4Change*. They spoke about how although the project focuses on sexual and gender-based violence, the different groups of girls and their communities narrowed in on different specific focuses. For example, a group of girls and young women in Khethani chose to focus on the intersection of SGBV and intimate partner violence. Young women at Durban University of Technology engaged in campus-based activism by working with a local radio station, and a group of young men at the same university have been working to encourage other men to play a part in ending gender-based violence.

The Girls Leading Change group from Eastern Cape has now produced three books. All of the girls have graduated and are now teaching in mostly rural communities. Lisa noted that group mentorship and workshops/retreats have been the most popular mentoring styles across the sites, and that peer-to-peer mentoring has developed organically as the girls have become valuable support systems for each other and the girls in their communities. Many of the girls have stressed that the violence women experience is often perpetrated under the guise of tradition and culture, so a critical component of mentorship is enabling young women to critically engage with practices that have been oppressive and harmful, and to help these young women see themselves as agents of change. Inspired by conversations from Treaty 6, Lisa believes that Auntyship has great potential in South Africa as there is a cultural history of grandmothers and older girls mentoring younger girls through puberty and sexual relationships. Finally, Lisa noted that "mosaic mentorships" is promising as all forms of mentorship are valuable and meaningful, and that a multi-pronged approach would be best.

Rankin Inlet

The final panelists were Jennica Alhda, Haily May Ussak, and Julia Ussak from Rankin Inlet. They discussed how *More*

Than Words incorporated more cultural aspects into the arts-based program, “Girls Talk Back”, by inviting community members to come and lead workshops for girls relating to cultural practices such as throat singing and tattooing. Older girls in the group have taken on a mentorship role for the younger girls. Julia mentioned how rewarding it is to teach the younger girls and help them improve upon their skills. Haily May noted that she is very excited to be taking on this mentor role, and that her favorite part of the program was making videos with the little kids and watching them have fun while participating. She hopes to do a sewing program with the girls sometime soon to help them learn more about their culture.

Breakout Rooms

Room 1

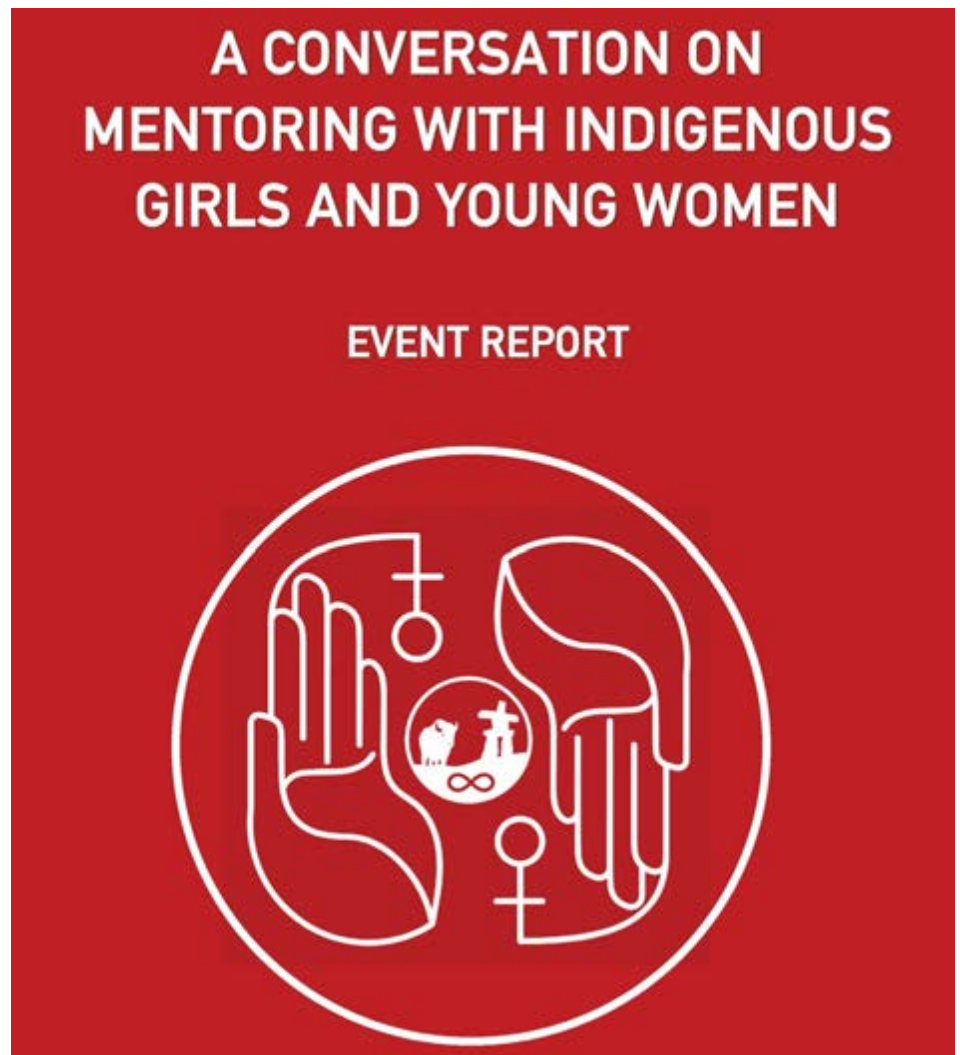
Sarah Flicker, York University

This room discussed some of the challenges of researching the difference that mentorship makes among Indigenous youth. One of the challenges that was highlighted during the discussion was that of meeting the expectations of funders and creating the proper documentation during the process without interrupting it. It was stressed that researchers and academics must be able to find a way to advocate and research mentorship models, but in a way that is not extractive or exploitative as certain stories should not be shared simply to validate funding.

Room 2

Lisa Starr, McGill University

This room talked about what some of the most important elements are to include and emphasize when it comes to mentorship. The group stressed that there is not one specific way to do mentorship. Going in with one specific goal is not productive, and you have to be completely open and flexible for what’s to come in a mentor-mentee relationship. It takes time to cultivate a trusting and meaningful relationship, so it is important to not rush the process and to always check in with the mentee to make sure that they are feeling safe and comfortable. Many participants noted that when working with young people, you need to learn when and how to get out of the way. It’s important for mentors to be cheerleaders, but to follow and not lead. It is also important to create a balance between making space and taking space, and to embrace the fact that those who teach also learn.



For further information on the discussions held, access the [event report](#).

Room 3

Katie MacEntee, University of Toronto

This room discussed the challenges faced during mentorship and how to overcome them. The group noted that some of the challenges include creating a safe space for young people to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions, especially in small communities where everyone knows each other. Another challenge is that of community resistance, and understanding the cultural appropriateness of certain topics. The group stressed the importance of mentors taking the time to truly connect with and understand their mentee and their community, as well as working with their schedules so that the relationship can be consistent.

Conference Closing

Marjorie closed the event with gratitude for the ancestors guiding us, and for the valuable knowledge that was shared and received.

Next Steps

COVID-19 has clearly had an impact on the mentoring activities planned for work across the various sites. However, we hope that conversations such as this one help to keep the ideas circulating. An extensive literature review of mentorship practices is underway and, as was obvious from the panel, learning across sites remains key. Onward to planning for Imibizo Intergenerational 2021!

Intern Profile: Sonia Bucan

Sonia did an internship at the PCL as part of the Arts Internship program. She is starting her fourth year at McGill University, double-majoring in International Development Studies and Political Science. She has experience as a writer and researcher, with a passion for human rights, social justice, and sustainable development.