

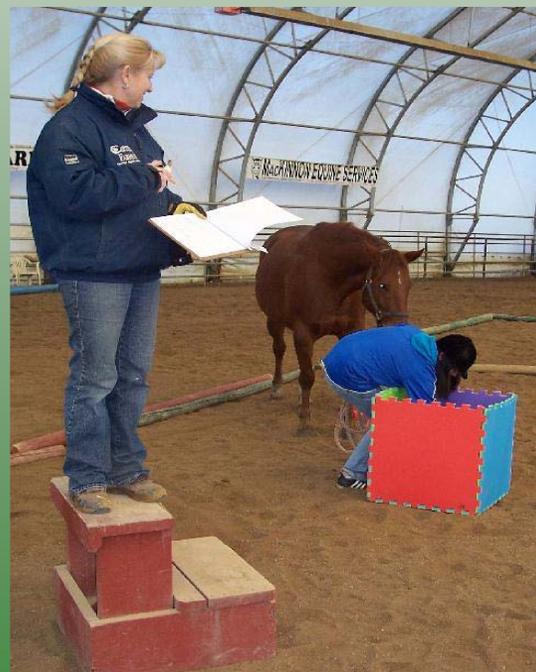
Developing and Testing a Culturally Competent Measure of the Effectiveness of Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) Programs with First Nations Youth who Abuse Solvents

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Introduction

This proposal brings together two areas within which there is a serious absence of research attention: problematic substance use, particularly solvent abuse, by First Nations youth and Equine Assisted Learning (EAL). Canadian research indicates that solvent abusers are typically between the ages of 10 and 17. If Canada is going to invest in EAL programs, the programs need culturally competent tools for transforming program goals into measurable objectives. EAL programs are designed to engage youth in experiential learning, with some incorporating an educational philosophy based on an Aboriginal worldview. EAL programming requires youth to interact with the horse and their cohort and in turn, improve individual functioning and communal well-being. The Aboriginal educative philosophy, EAL program objectives, and the psychology of learning need to be blended into the development of a culturally competent instrument to assist with determining program impact. This study sets out to examine: To what extent does a proposed culturally competent instrument detect client change based on educative treatment provided in an Equine Assisted Learning program? Done effectively, the combination of adequate psychometric properties and substantive interpretation, based on an Aboriginal worldview, will increase community knowledge and capacity building and promote continuity after the research funding ends.



The Purpose

The purpose of this study is to construct and validate a culturally competent instrument, among First Nations youth who abuse solvents, as a measure of client change (improved behavioural functioning and well-being) in Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) programs.



Research Issues:

1. How to detect/measure the benefit and effectiveness of an EAL program embedded within long-term (i.e., 6 month) inpatient addictions treatment programs?
2. Understanding the cultural teachings about the importance of the horse (and its spirit) to Aboriginal communities to determine the aspects that would be relevant to youth in treatment and thereby enhance the benefit from participating in an EAL program.
3. Standardizing a culturally competent measure of EAL that will be generalizable across all Aboriginal communities.
4. Understanding the curriculum of EAL programs (i.e., intended learning objectives) to determine what knowledge and skills should be acquired by youth that will be helpful to them following completion of treatment and when they are back in their home communities.

Methodology

A culturally competent instrument will be developed in a step wise process while adhering to the *CIHR Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People*. A research agreement among the First Nations, academic, and EAL partners in the companion study has been established by the OCAP principles.

First, the three instructional domains for EAL programs will be defined through a conventional literature review. Subsequently, cultural content experts (EAL program staff, addictions counsellors, Elders in First Nations communities) will provide substantive interpretations of the definitions reflecting Aboriginal awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Secondly, item banks for each domain will be constructed using previously established sources as a guide; Social and Communication Disorders Checklist³, Harter Self-Perception Scale⁴, among others. The resulting item banks will be independently reviewed by content experts for item fit (relevance and representativeness) with the corresponding definition.

Step three will identify the best items for a draft instrument to be pilot tested.

Step four involves pilot testing the instrument by recruiting from similar EAL programs in Saskatchewan and Ontario (estimated n = 75). The Saskatchewan (White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre) residential solvent abuse program has an intake of 12 female youth, each in treatment for 20 sessions. The Ontario (Nimkee NupiGawagan Healing Centre) residential solvent abuse program has an intake of 10 female or male youth, each in treatment for 12 sessions. The intakes in the Ontario EAL program are rotated for gender.

Theoretical Framework

Generally, EAL is not considered therapy but rather is described as an educative program based on experiential learning. The majority of EAL programs are designed to facilitate improved client functioning in three domains: cognition (understanding and problem-solving), communication skills, and consequential behaviour. This study will translate fundamental components of the philosophy of education from an Aboriginal worldview (relational, community-focused, and family oriented) and the psychology of learning (cognitive-based) into measurable EAL objectives for First Nations youth who abuse solvents. These objectives will reflect a set of standardized and observable behaviours and attitudes identified among First Nations youth benefitting from solvent abuse treatment defined in the literature as: a) academic performance; b) mental well-being (cognition); c) spiritual identity; and d) anti-social behaviour. The scientific validation of the benefit of the horse in contributing to behavioural change and well-being in First Nations adolescent populations is limited. Treating individuals who problematically use substances, particularly solvents, has gained some attention in Canada over the past decade. Research has shown that solvents are often the first mood-altering substance used by youth because they are readily available (e.g., paint thinner, glue, gasoline), inexpensive, and easily concealed. Bridging the areas of EAL and treatment for solvent abuse among First Nations youth has the potential to make a unique and significant contribution to understanding youth treatment for addictions.

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