

Applying an Indigenous Evaluation Framework in Reshaping a Youth Skills and Pre-Employment Program¹

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Background: Narrowly focused pre-employment programs that evaluate impact in terms of finding work have been inadequate for responding to the realities and aspirations of urban Indigenous youth.

Purpose: This article focuses on Odabi ("roots" in Anicinabe), a skills and pre-employment program for youth created and offered by an urban Indigenous organization in Quebec.

Setting: The evaluation research is part of a 4-year community-university partnership with Val-d'Or Native Friendship Center.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: An Indigenous evaluation framework served to examine the program's evolution and outcomes.

Data Collection and Analysis: Life trajectories, sharing circles, arts-based methods, and collective consensual data analytical procedures with program participants ($N = 25$) and staff ($N = 11$) informed the evaluation research.

Findings: Applying an Indigenous evaluation framework illuminated the program's evolution toward flexibility, circularity, and a relational, holistic approach. While acknowledging the value of technical employment skills, participants viewed the program's strength as being rooted in its collective and relational aspects, fostering a strong sense of identity, and belonging. Efforts to create culturally relevant pre-employment programming also revealed urban Indigenous youth's complex and often ambivalent relationship with employment. Having an Indigenous learning organization at the helm made the decolonizing approach to evaluation possible, enabling the reclamation of the narrative so that the success of the pre-employment program could be redefined through the lens of Indigenous youth.

Keywords: *Indigenous evaluation; programming; employment; youth; decolonizing.*

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History of programs intended to support Indigenous peoples has been patchy due to failure to understand and authentically address their realities and aspirations. Being more responsive involves having Indigenous organizations at the helm of shaping programs (Jewell et al., 2020), including relevant forms of evaluation (OECD, 2018). This article is about one such initiative, its development, and how suitable forms of evaluation supported the process of revamping a program.

More specifically, we examine Odabi (“roots” in Anicinabe), a skills and pre-employment program for youth created and offered by an urban Indigenous organization in Quebec. While youth employment programs are one of the most accessed services by Indigenous peoples living in cities, studies on these have been scarce (St-Cyr, 2019; Youmans et al., 2023). Here, we examine the evolution of such a program and its significance using an Indigenous evaluation framework. This 4-year community–university partnership was initiated by the Val-d’Or Native Friendship Center (VNFC) interested in documenting and assessing the scope and impact of this innovative program and how the program responded to for Indigenous youth’s realities.

We begin by considering the historical and cultural context of employment programming for Indigenous youth. We then present the background on the program and the relevance of an Indigenous evaluation framework. After reviewing the research design, we discuss the findings as they relate to the program’s evolution and to how participants experience its value. The backstory of revising the program and the redefining of the notion of success that emerged through this evaluation process provide insight into the decolonizing journey required for offering pre-employment programs to better respond to the realities and priorities of Indigenous urban youth.

The Historical and Cultural Context of Indigenous Youth Employment Programs

At the outset, we recognize that the disparities and disproportionate statistics related to employment for Indigenous youth compared to non-Indigenous are symptomatic of deeper issues which call for revisiting the focus of employment programs. Generally, the historical legacy of discriminatory and assimilationist policies has obstructed employment prospects of Indigenous peoples across Canada and elsewhere (Dinku, 2021). The employment sector has largely been

unaccommodating, with little consideration given to reconciling Indigenous community values with those of mainstream society. For instance, a qualitative study involving 56 Indigenous employees across six Canadian provinces showed that the priority Indigenous people placed on family, cultural, and relational obligations was mostly not supported by employers, resulting in Indigenous employees feeling pressure to conform, feeling marginalized, or leaving the organizations (Julien et al., 2017). Similarly, research with Māori employees in New Zealand identified that cultural well-being in the workplace and collectivistic orientations were significant indicators of job satisfaction and job retention, pointing to the importance of supporting cultural well-being in workplaces (Haar & Brougham, 2013).

Raising awareness of Indigenous realities with employers and strengthening collaborations with Indigenous communities to adequately support an Indigenous workforce has been identified as key for hiring and retention (Théberge et al., 2019). A study with 43 employers in different regions of Quebec showed that shortage in labor force and pressure to comply with legal requirements or to build social acceptability for projects helped in hiring more Indigenous workers, emphasizing the need for targeted efforts to recruit from this labor pool, including close collaborations with Indigenous partners and employability readiness programs (Caron et al., 2020).

Feelings of exclusion, culture shock, and misunderstanding, as well as lack of healing and employment and education opportunities, are exacerbated for Indigenous youth in urban areas because of ongoing colonial policies and historical traumas (Fast et al., 2016). Historically, systematic and indirect discrimination coupled with a lack of resources are considered the most prominent barriers to Indigenous youth employment (Youmans et al., 2023). This is a harsh reality—with Indigenous youth employment rates estimated at 52.9% for First Nations (ages 15–24), compared to 65.4% for all youth in Quebec in the same age group (Statistique Canada, 2023). The disparity is also seen in the NEET (not in employment, education or training) rate, which is 22.1% for Indigenous youth compared to 12.0% for non-Indigenous youth.

Meanwhile, mainstream youth employability programs have often been unsuccessful in responding to the inequality and unsupportive workplaces (First Nations and Inuit Labour Market Advisory Committee, 2023). Neoliberal market labor policies and narrowly focused short-term training programs that ignore the historical legacy of colonization and oppression contribute to the

marginalization of Indigenous peoples (Jewell et al., 2020).

MacKinnon (2015) found that the most successful trainees were those who were helped in “[the] building of positive relationships; the expansion of social networks; the increased self-confidence; and the reclamation of cultures that lead [them] to better know who they are and where they want to go in life” (p.193). She calls for decolonizing training programs to center on creating a comfortable and safe learning environment that prioritizes healing, self-esteem, and confidence.

Promising employment training programs for Indigenous peoples suggest that success needs to be redefined to extend beyond quantifying completion rates and employment, and more profoundly rooted in Indigenous worldviews and values. Offering culturally safe programs that consider Indigenous worldviews, community connections, and cultural practices has been identified as critical to supporting cultural identity—an approach that remains largely undocumented in employment services (St-Cyr, 2019). A study on the support for collective entrepreneurship among Indigenous youth found, for instance, that creating a culturally relevant program involved attending to the four dimensions of the medicine wheel—spiritual, emotional, physical and mental—pointing to the significance of tangible and intangible aspects of training programs to adequately reach out to young people in ways that they could relate to (Fortin-Lefebvre et al., 2023). Indigenization entailed valuing a holistic pedagogy, Indigenous identity and relationships being foremost, with the technical elements of entrepreneurship coming after. Also vital is to be Indigenous-led to create and offer services and pathways that are based in Indigenous epistemologies considering the incompatibility felt by many Indigenous peoples in urban areas between Indigenous (and non-) worldviews of prosperity and well-being (Jewell et al., 2020).

Program Background

Given the context of disparity in employment for Indigenous peoples and the value of Indigenous-led initiatives, the pre-employment program offered by the VNFC provided a unique opportunity for a

research collaboration. An earlier study had focused on defining culturally safe employment programs based on interviews with former participants and employers (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2022). This was a chance to document and assess the evolution of rethinking a pre-employment program over a 4-year period. The broad aim of the pre-employment program has continuously been to support urban Indigenous youth who have difficulty in entering and maintaining jobs, but the approach and delivery of the program was undergoing multiple changes. Assessing this innovation became the focus of our evaluation research, particularly the context of an increasingly urban Indigenous population—52.8% in Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2022).

When we started this evaluation research, the program was called Mikimo (“they work” in Anicinabe), with four programs based on level of employment readiness. Each had a distinct duration (20 to 30 hours per week over 12 to 52 weeks, depending on the stream), profile of participants in terms of readiness for employment and motivation levels, and funding sources (See Table 1). For instance, Mikanake and the Madjimakwin focused on life and general skills, with participants in the latter receiving individual support and guidance in addition to participating in pre-employability workshops and introductory activities on trades and professions. The Odabi stream involved self-awareness, health/well-being, trades/professions, and job search, while also emphasizing life skills and cultural identity. The goal was social integration, enabling participants who are far removed from the job market to address their personal challenges and improve their overall situation. The Wabidijan stream focused on socio-professional integration via an individualized mentor–apprentice approach in the workplace. It was a training program that led to a certificate of training in a semi-skilled diploma to help enter the workforce. The Tciman stream was for those closest to employment, supporting work experiences and entrance to the labor market. The program was conceived as linear, with participants transitioning from one stream to the next, with core training programs being offered by partner organizations, including the adult education center.

Table 1. Overview of Mikimo program

	Mikanake	Madjimakwin	Odabi	Wabidijan	Tciman
Service Area	Life skills	Life skills	Skills promoting pre-employability and employability	Skills promoting employability	Accessibility and job retention
Target of profile	Individuals experiencing social exclusion and facing major socio-economic challenges.	Individuals experiencing social exclusion and facing significant socio-economic challenges (youth on last-resort assistance).	Individuals distant from the labor market and facing socio-professional barriers.	Individuals close to the labor market and facing employability barriers.	Individuals ready for employment but facing difficulties accessing the labor market.
Type of pathway	Pathway for developing life skills based on exploring possibilities and stimulating interests.	Pathway for developing life skills leading to the creation of an action plan.	Pathway for developing essential and professional skills facilitating access to semi-specialized trades.	Pathway for developing professional skills through an individualized approach using a mentor/apprentice pairing model in the fields of tourism and hospitality.	Pathway for developing essential and professional skills facilitating access to non-specialized trades.

The VNFC was, however, rethinking its employability program offering, given also a call for proposals from the Skills for Success Program Research and Innovation Stream (Canadian Ministry of Employment and Social Development). This provided an opportunity to renew the program under the name Odabi.

Relevance of an Indigenous Evaluation Framework

To support Indigenous-led organizations in rethinking pre-employment programs, we chose to use an Indigenous evaluation framework, rather than a Western-based evaluation. We found this approach more suitable, aligning with efforts to decolonize evaluation. This involved moving away from external evaluators imposing predefined program outcomes based on linear logical models, and from Eurocentric-based methods, and instead relying on approaches grounded in community priorities and cyclical learning (Chilisa, 2020).

Decolonizing evaluation involves a values-driven approach rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and attentive to context and local needs, emphasizing “the social-ecological systems in which [participants] exist” (Chilisa & Bowman, 2023, p. 5). Indigenous evaluation frameworks do not follow a uniform set of steps or standardized practices. Rather, they are a responsive and iterative process that evolves according to community needs and priorities. The emphasis is on the journey, on the unfolding of the story: “learning how to assess the story as it unfolds by exploring questions that can guide the process and applying strategies for seeking answers through the implementation of a responsive evaluation design and methods” (Nadeau et al., 2023, p. 39). Recognizing that knowledge is contextual also calls for community involvement throughout evaluation design and data analysis, where there is mutual growth and learning for participants. Instead of a narrow focus on outcomes and what needs to be improved, an Indigenous evaluation framework centers on (a) incorporating the strengths, assets,

and solutions that exist within the community; (b) decolonizing data by collecting data that is not just beneficial and useful but also sensitive and reflective of Indigenous context and way of knowing; and (c) considering community, whereby knowledge is relational and contextual (Locklear et al., 2023).

Research Design

The evaluation research was initiated by the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Center (VNFC), which identified a co-construction approach to learning and knowledge with the Youth Research Chair to document the participants' progress throughout the project in order to evaluate this innovative model. As an organization, the VNFC has been at the forefront of renewing service offers for urban Indigenous peoples as "places of learning and of dynamic innovative training" (Lévesque et al, 2019, p. 359). The partnership was also well aligned with the Youth Research Chair's priorities, which included youth employment and culturally safe programming. The opportunity for sustained collaboration over a 4-year period further contributed to the suitability of the partnership. Use of an Indigenous evaluation framework was supported by the existing relationships, given Natasha's prior collaborations with the VFNC on numerous developmental evaluation initiatives over the last decade (see Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2021, 2022).

Consistent with an Indigenous evaluation framework, the methods adhered to principles of relationality, reciprocity, reflexivity, respect, responsiveness, and responsibility (Levac et al., 2018). To ensure "practice methods with good intent" (p. 12) and as guests within Nitakinan, anicinape aki,² communications with the staff were frequent, involving extensive back-and-forth to debrief and codevelop appropriate evaluation activities.

A combination of methods allowed participants to voice their feelings, self-perceptions, and aspirations through methods that were meaningful and engaging. This involved life trajectories sharing circles, arts-based methods, and a collective consensual data analytical procedure. For the life trajectories, we invited participants to mark their experiences in employment training, personal and family life events, and movement, hobbies, and activities on an 8" × 14" paper. These depictions, with employment experiences alongside other dimensions, supported participants to reflect

holistically on their trajectories and the context in which they joined the Odabi program in individual 45–60 minute conversations with a research team member.

For the arts-based activities, we integrated an evaluation focus into an existing programming activity called patchwork, where participants depicted how they saw themselves. The debriefing of their drawing served to assess where participants were coming from and their progress in the program. We also drew on a tree metaphor frequently referenced by a key staff member as a key means for exploring the program's significance. Initially, each participant reflected on their personal journey by imagining themselves as a tree representing who they were before and since going through the program. Subsequently, participants collectively described the program as a forest where each participant represented a tree and discussed what Odabi brought to their tree and how they had changed because of participating in the program. In a culminating activity, we used a collective consensual data analytical procedure to engage four interested participants in regrouping preliminary coding themes identified from previous research activities to describe Odabi's impact. Another sharing circle engaged participants in exploring their relationship to work—more specifically what they valued in connection with employment. To initiate the discussion, participants were given four sticky notes to place in quadrants, allowing them to explore their thoughts on salaried work, emotions related to employment, access to jobs, and factors influencing work retention.

Overall, between two and 10 people participated in one or more of 11 group activities, and 25 people took part in the life trajectory interviews. In parallel, there were activities with staff, including three individual interviews and a sharing circle with six former staff. Over the course of 4 years, 11 staff and 25 participants contributed to the evaluation. Since there have been more than 200 participants in the program since 2017, this represents 12.5% of program participants. In terms of gender, 14 identified as women, 10 as men, and one as gender neutral; most were Anicinabe or Cree. The average age of participants was 25, indicative of the program's focus on youth, with an age range of 18 to 36. The study was mainly carried out in French, though English was used with a few anglophone participants and groups. The activities were facilitated by the staff or the research team during four field visits (October 2019, November

² <https://www.uqat.ca/reconnaissance-territoriale/#definition-01>

2022, March 2023, and December 2023), consisting of four days each.

Along with following the ethical guidelines of Concordia University's Research Ethics Committee and ensuring activities informing the evaluation research had signed consent forms, we attended to the relational aspect (Wilson, 2008). This meant taking part in activities helping participants to know us and feel more at ease in sharing. We also spent time with staff explaining the purpose and role of our activities as supporting Odabi and its learning. During a debrief focus group, a partner reflected on the appreciation she felt for our approach: "I saw them last year really wanting to do the interviews and wanting to contribute" (sfg, m, v4).³ Below, we present the findings in terms of the evolution of the program, followed by the participants' appreciation of the program.

Findings

Program Evolution

Emerging from the reflections shared during the evaluation is a story of a program that evolved to better align with participants' realities and aspirations. In the following, we present key shifts undertaken.

A significant reshaping involved moving away from a linear model to a circular one. Instead of

remaining a program with distinct streams with criteria for participants and timeframes, the program broadened its objectives to encompass four areas of focus—employment, counseling, connection to culture, and collective projects (see Figure 1). This was aligned better with the realities and perspectives of the participants, whose life trajectories are complex and marked by numerous personal, familial, educational, and professional challenges. Most had not completed high school, with little work experience other than seasonal. Thus, many participants were far away from the labor market: "who stay at home or who have dropped out of school for years.... There is a lot of addiction, there is a lot of violence" (sfg, m, v2).

The program also became more flexible adopting an open-door policy wherein participants with different levels of readiness for entering the workforce could join at any point in time. This design was better suited to participants' lived reality, considering their frequent back-and forth movement and often jagged work experience. Being open and less rigid made the program also more strength-based. A staff member explained: "The paths we had [before] did not respect their pace. It was very structured.... We put them in situations of failure, and it worsened their sense of incompetence, their self-confidence, their self-esteem" (si, f, v1).

³ Quotations have been codified as follows: staff member (s) or program participant (p); interview (i) or focus

group (fg); gender (f) or (m); age (if a participant); and the site visit number.

Figure 1. Overview of Odabi Program



Significantly, revamping included redefining the criteria of success for the program, as well as modifying the forms of reporting to funders. In the past, the focus was largely on data about participants obtaining employment or pursuing education; however, this information was limited, inadequately reflecting the program's success. Capturing the shift in approach entailed broadening the program reporting to extend beyond statistics on employment and education/training to include information on participants in action, as indicated by steps taken on their healing journey. For instance, in 2023, out of 13 participants, one-third were employed or studying and half actively engaged in a healing journey, indicative of the program's success. To convey transformations that could not be reflected through quantitative data, reports included quotes gathered during the evaluation research. This

qualitative data was important because "Success is not based on something we have in a grid and a passing grade of 40, 50, 60%. It is linked to how the person will be able to feel, will be able to talk about it" (si, m, v4).

Another key shift was in terms of working from a relational approach that centered on supporting the participants' rhythm. Initially, the program was organized around activities that followed a standardized portfolio using lecture-based formats to cover topics to prepare for entering the workforce. Portions of the program were delivered by partners outside the Friendship Center, such as the local adult education center. But partnerships with external organizations made it difficult. There were requirements in terms of having a minimum number of participants, which were hard to meet given participants' fluctuating home conditions, including caring responsibilities and community

obligations such as attending funerals. There was also an inability to be accommodating: “There was a schedule, with a more rigid course syllabus, so we could less go [sic] where they needed to go, [and take the time] when they needed to talk” (sfg, f, v4). The content was often inconsiderate of participants’ realities: “The partner was not adapted. They came to give courses on budgeting, and then we went into mortgages and life insurance” (sfg, f, v1). For many members unable to project themselves in the near future and just struggling to find a place to live in the cities, this type of information was not only irrelevant but insensitive.

Reflections shared during the evaluation research also pointed to the contradiction and challenge of using a pedagogical approach that could have caused many participants to drop out of school in the first place: “If they are not in school

benches, why would we repeat the same thing here? We have changed the approach” (sfg, m, v1). The renewal of Odabi involved adopting a pedagogical approach relevant and responsive to participants realities. This included providing appropriate spaces for participants to feel comfortable to engage and a space where they can leave their moccasins, artwork, and emotions. Instead of a conventional classroom, they put in place chairs and tables that could easily be moved and replaced with carpets and cushions placed in a circle (See Figure 2). Staff also modified their job titles, from “employment counselor” to “skills enrichment counselor.” The modified job titles were more indicative of the type of support being provided: “The difference is that here we are recognized for the interventions we make” (si, m, v3).

Figure 2. Space for Odabi Program



Staff facilitated conversations, working on participants’ issues on their own terms. For instance, “If we talk about emotions, we will start on a topic of emotions; we may listen to a little video. After that, really talk about the participants’ experiences” (sfg, m, v1). This care was, at the core, described this way: “This trust, this relationship with the facilitators, is very special... I don’t know in which institution this model could be replicated.” (pfg, f, v4). Staff reflected on how transformative this shift in approach was: “We support them much better; the transitions are much more fluid. We are no longer in the requirements of Western society

where ‘you have so many hours to do this’” (sfg, f, v4). The select external partners who collaborated in delivering the program provided workshops that were codeveloped with CAAVD staff and used arts and creative workshops around empowerment, team building, and self-expression.

Related to this relational aspect was working from more of a holistic perspective, recognizing that many healing and other types of psycho-social supports were integral to a pre-employment program. “The Odabi model is more fluid ... because there are skills enrichment counselors who take care of the common core [pre-employability] and a

counselor outside [for the work environments]” (fg, f, v3). This type of support was greatly facilitated by being a program located within the Friendship Center so that participants could benefit from all the other services offered—and also by having Indigenous staff part of the team. The Indigenous staff greatly facilitate trust, allowing staff to go deeper in ways that would not be possible otherwise. “A person who is non-Indigenous, who has not necessarily been confronted with the realities, cannot necessarily always understand” (sfg, f, v1). Participants repeatedly shared how being surrounded by other Indigenous peoples was culturally securing. “I find that here, it’s people who really have good social awareness—they’re conscious ... what the Center gives me is that it helps me build my self-confidence, because, precisely, it’s people who are more accepting than society in general” (pfg, m, v4).

Indeed, the activity on the relationship to work revealed that participants had ambivalent feelings toward employment (see Figure 3). On the one hand, they viewed employment in utilitarian terms: “I need money to pay my rent and other stuff,” but several also fear the workplace, identifying being nervous, anxious about the unknown, and scared of being misunderstood. To maintain work they want to be respected and fulfilled in their workplace, as reflected in statements such as a “for a job that fills your cup” and “a job to improve yourself; for a change in environment.” Many also find it difficult to project themselves into the future, and when they do, it is often in terms of low-paying jobs: “I have no dream job, just want to work. Could be cleaning or in in the kitchen.” Most who reported on positive work experiences were employed in Indigenous organizations where they felt more supported.

Figure 3. Activity on Relationship to Work



In retrospect, the story of how and why the program was reshaped reflects a decolonizing process, whereby the program design and implementation were redefined to better respond to the context. This became possible because the organization itself embraced this shift, although the process was not straightforward. A staff member reflected toward the end of the 4-year evaluation research period:

In the first Mikimo model, we may just not have had the right model—we were ourselves colonized in the way we imagined it. We presented a project within the funding parameters at that time, but it was also caught up in our own colonial paradigms. (sfg, f, v4)

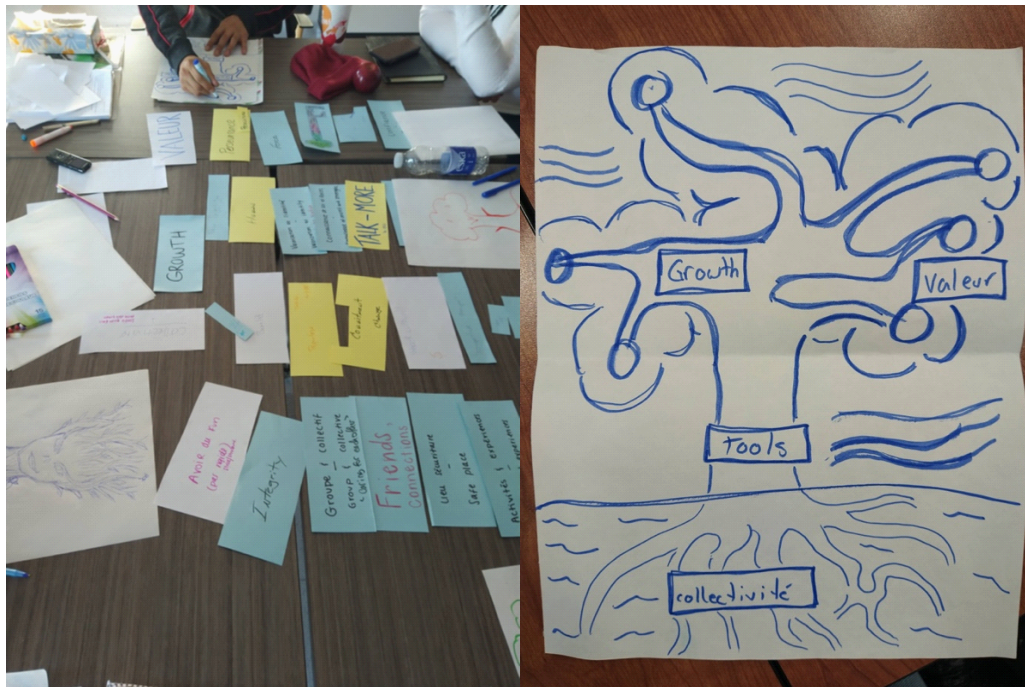
We were struck by how the decolonizing process calls for ongoing critical awareness.

Significance of Program for Participants. Another contribution of the Indigenous evaluation framework was to foreground participants' appreciation of the program, offering a distinct interpretation of the program's significance to them. The significance of the program emerged from the collective consensual data analytical procedure used in a culminating activity, whereby participants engaged in regrouping preliminary coding themes identified from previous research activities to describe Odabi's impact. To tell the story of the program's outcomes, participants extended the metaphor and associated dominant themes with the image of a tree. The tree metaphor, echoed in the program's name (Odabi, meaning "roots"), was mentioned regularly, to remind participants of the importance of growth despite the challenges they face in urban environments:

The tree is significant because it's not because you are in the city that you are not a tree; you are an Indigenous person, too. Once you will have self-confidence, you will be able to assert yourself as an Indigenous person toward society and toward the community. (si, m, v2)

The following section presents participants' appreciation of the program, illustrated through the ways they labeled the parts of the tree, with the roots representing the collective, the trunk as the tools, the branches offering growth, and the fruit strengthening values (see Figure 4). As one participant explained: "The community is the root. And to grow, then it's the tools—the trunk. As we grow, there are branches that we develop. After that, there are values that grow like little apples" (pfg, f, v4). The descriptions reveal the program characteristics participants prioritized.

Figure 4. Collective Consensual Data Analysis.



A Program Rooted in the Collective. Identifying the collective in the roots reflects the centrality placed on the group aspect of Odabi. Participants considered the program to be rooted in relationships; being part of a community and connected was seen as integral to supporting their well-being. "You are never alone with your roots. Yes, the center is also about connections, roots that

[allow you to] stay connected with the community. Odabi tries to strengthen the roots with the community" (si, m, v3). The trust created between staff and youth made these young people feel confident to speak and open up. Participants felt they belonged: "I had become isolated. But I made good friends [at Odabi], real ones.... It helped me

progress towards being better, towards the positive" (pi, f, v1).

Youth spoke about how solutions would emerge from the group when they were taking the lead in the conversations. Having an open and welcoming space encouraged exchanges that could lead to intervention in a way that was not possible in one-on-one interactions. "I prefer to do group activities, collectively. It's fun to do intervention in an alternative way, not conventional, sitting in the office, sitting face to face. Here we talk" (sfg, f, v4). A participant remarked, "Listening, sharing, it leads ... to realizing that we're not alone in going through these things" (pi, m, v2).

The group itself constituted a source of support:

Participants who are further along in their journey sometimes have the solution for the other person, or they realize: "Ah well, I'm not all alone in this." It creates a family, and we [the caregivers] help to foster that." (si, m, v1)

Given commonality in life trajectories that have been marked by disruptions, the collective space for sharing is particularly meaningful.

Strengthening Tools (Trunk) Used to Grow (Branches). The skills and abilities acquired and transmitted in Odabi were identified by participants as the trunk of the tree. Workshops and activities covered a range of areas, from

discovering employment options and practicing healthy lifestyle habits to learning about life skills. For instance, activities included having the group visit a company to see job options, inviting a guest speaker (depending on what people were going through—justice, nurse, addictions), or having an outing. These were part of expanding the knowledge of possibilities and strengthening confidence. Thus, volunteering in the VFNC or being part of community activities showed these youth that they could contribute to the community and have skills. This was important, as their lives have been marked by multiple challenges, many of which were depicted in their individual drawings showing struggle, pain, and resilience. The suffering, as depicted by another participant and shown in Figure 5, was described as follows:

This is my tree. All the roots represent my family and ancestries. I put the blue in dark here because this is how society affected my family, drowning my roots. And I put red to represent love, because even though I came from a broken family, we tell loving [things to] each other, and I put here black because sometimes my mind goes in the wrong direction, but at the end of the day, I still choose love and positivity. (pfg, m, v4)

Figure 5. Participant Drawing of Tree.



Note. Drawing by a 19-year-old Cree man.

Transpiring through their art, there is hope; relationships and community are important sources of resilience.

Arts-based activities during the evaluation research provided participants a way of letting go: “It’s satisfying to start with nothing and end up with something” (pfg, m, v2). For some the patchwork

activity brought up difficult emotions. One, for instance, threw their first version in the garbage, returning the following day to start from scratch. She described her meticulously made collage (see Figure 6): “I’m in a black bubble and I push away all the positive” (pfg, f, v2).

Figure 6. Drawing from Patchwork Activity



A central component of Odabi is building confidence and a sense of self-worth, both of which are qualities that have been impeded by a history of discrimination and intergenerational trauma. A staff member explained:

In general, the training is about preparing to live in society. Odabi is about reinforcing the idea that you are Indigenous, but that you have a place in society—it’s the pride of identity! But it’s difficult because there is a “barrier,” a cultural shock. Indigenous values sometimes go against the expectations of the job market. (sfg, f, v4)

Nurturing pride in one’s own identity and fostering a sense of belonging are essential, since

many were uprooted upon moving to the city. A participant explained:

The VFNC helped me get by in the city. I must have been around 25 years old [when I registered]. I had never left my community before. I didn’t really know the system, and I learned how it worked. I gained self-confidence. I enrolled in a vocational training program, and I learned to be independent. (pi, m, v4)

Building and reinforcing confidence requires taking a holistic and strengths-based approach:

If you want to equip someone to be ready for employment, you can’t neglect their spiritual,

cultural, family, and identity aspects. You have to help them be a whole person. We are here to help them find the tools they need or to value the tools they already have to help them in their employability process. (si, f, v1)

The branches of the tree represent the growth that results from using the tools acquired in Odabi. Participants referred to a range of transformations, such as developing a skill for self-reflection: “Time to think carefully—where you want to go, what path; how you want to grow as a person.” For several, it was about “possibilities and new beginnings” (pfg, m, v4). The participants are also more able to project themselves and identify their options, whether for employment, school, training, or personal changes in lifestyle.

A former participant explained the impact of Odabi in terms of becoming more aware of themselves and their abilities: “I had hidden skills. And then when you realize that you have these skills, you discover yourself” (pi, f, v1). Another likewise stated, “My tree has become more autonomous since Odabi. I learned a lot about myself and the job market. It helped keep my days in order, to give myself a structure” (pi, f, v3). Another participant reflected on how Odabi introduced her to the labor market:

It taught me to know the job market, because I had never worked before the Odabi program—I had always been a stay-at-home mom. I am the mother of three children, and it's not always easy, and I learned to recognize my limits. (pfg, f, v1)

Finally, the fruit of the tree was described as the values developed and acquired in Odabi. These included leadership, respect, strength, perseverance, confidence, and love (see Figure 4). Success was defined as something greater than finding a job, embodying a quality that shaped participants' entire way of being. It is this way of being that they retain and that will help them continue their life journey. “Before Odabi, I was really closed, and at first, I was shy. I bloomed during Odabi, like a flower” (pi, f, v4). It is the growth from involvement in Odabi that makes the program impactful. In this sense, the emphasis is on the process and the values, which support not only in their journey toward employment, but also other areas of their lives.

Discussion

Applying an Indigenous evaluation framework to present the story of the evolution and appreciation of Odabi helped surface the process and nature of reshaping a pre-employment program. We learned that responding to the complex realities of urban Indigenous youth calls for designing and offering alternative, culturally grounded pre-employment programs with relevant forms of evaluation approaches. The story that unfolds indicates that the relational component and the strengthening of one's identity and pride were foundational to supporting the acquisition of technical skills required for entering or retention in the labor market. For Indigenous youth whose lives are shaped by the enduring impacts of colonialism and assimilation policies, and who navigate complex challenges of identity, attending to their overall well-being is essential.

Our partnership involved taking the time to identify and develop methods congruent with the program and its evolving context. Earlier on in the evaluation, using the drawings from the patchwork activity, for instance, made sense because it was an activity that the staff had used and was well-suited for participants to express themselves. Indeed, we found arts-based methods participatory and supportive of Indigenous ways of knowing (Levac et al., 2018). Illustrating Chilisa's (2020) reference to decolonizing evaluation through attentive listening to metaphors, the image of a tree emerged as a powerful symbol of the program's value—its collective approach represented by the roots and its guiding values symbolized by the fruit. The Indigenous evaluation framework served to shed light on the backstory of the program, which would have been overlooked in Western-based evaluations. Instead of an emphasis on the fulfilment of predetermined goals and objectives, an “Indigenous evaluation embedded in Tribal ways of knowing situates the program as a journey of learning where all knowledge is good knowledge” (Nadeau et al., 2023, p. 40).

Consideration of the context and the strength brought attention to the process and nature of decolonizing a program. Indeed, the ability to innovate in assessing the program was greatly facilitated by the VFNC commitment to being a learning organization. As identified by several studies (Jewell et al., 2020; Landry et al., 2019; Lévesque et al., 2019), Friendship Centers are well placed to create and design programs imbued with cultural knowledge and Indigenous values. Although, despite the program being Indigenous-led and housed within an organization committed

to innovation, our experience revealed that decolonizing is a complex, evolving process requiring sustained critical reflection and awareness. Part of the journey involved recognizing and letting go of a colonized mindset to embrace a different narrative of a pre-employment program—one that is more holistic, and grounded in collective and relational aspects. It involved deep and challenging work, which will remain an ongoing effort.

With the Indigenous evaluation framework another vision of urban Indigenous youth and employment surfaced, one that moves away from simplified depictions of Indigenous youth as lacking skills, being vulnerable, and living in conditions of precarity. In the way these youth expressed their ambivalent feeling toward obtaining work, often low paying, there is an agency that needs to be better understood (Longo et al., 2020). This artistic rendition reflective of youth's appreciation of the program conveyed the value they place on belonging and the collective, echoing Fortin-Lefebvre and colleagues' (2023) findings on Indigenous-centric collective entrepreneurship programming for First Nations youth in Quebec, and Deschênes (2025), who point out that seeking and maintaining work are not an end in themselves for Indigenous youth in Quebec, but rather a means of promoting well-being and community sustainability.

Conclusion

As we have sought to illustrate in this article, the application of an Indigenous evaluation framework revealed the nature of the evolving journey of the pre-employment program Odabi. We presented the story of a program shifting away from a linear, largely externally delivered program and pedagogy, and the relevance of flexibility, relationality, working from a holistic perspective, and being connected to the services of the Friendship Center. We learned that this decolonizing process called for deep and heightened critical awareness and entailed much iteration, including undoing, redoing, and revisioning. Enacting this shift required not only Indigenous organizations at the helm of these processes but also the creation of evaluation practices that enable the reclamation of narrative so that success of pre-employment program can be redefined through the lens of Indigenous youth.

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