

# Research UPDATE

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## Summary

This article describes how an arts-based, recreational youth development program called *Outside Looking In* is part of a new trend that is more inclusive of Aboriginal cultural practices and values, and more focused on addressing the self-determined needs of Aboriginal people.

## Key Terms

**Culturally-sensitive** - Approaches to program initiatives that incorporate and consider individuals' cultural histories and meanings.

**Self-determination** - Input and control by Aboriginal peoples.

**Aboriginal youth development** - The ways in which recreation is used as a means to positively influence and impact Aboriginal youth.

## Outside Looking In: A Recreational Youth Development Program for Aboriginal Youth

**Audrey R. Giles, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa; Alana Rovito, BHKin; and Outside Looking In**

In Canada, sport and recreation programs for Aboriginal youth have typically used interventions aimed at affecting, modifying or controlling social behaviours. This article describes how an arts-based, recreational youth development program called Outside Looking In is part of a new trend that is more inclusive of Aboriginal cultural practices and values, and more focused on addressing the self-determined needs of Aboriginal people.



## About the Program

Outside Looking In (OLI) is a youth development program created by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people. The program offers Aboriginal youth the opportunity to be involved in arts-based physical and recreational activities. The program is also set up to provide non-Aboriginal Canadians the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal peoples through OLI's annual multi-media performance in Toronto.

To be eligible for the OLI program, an applicant community must illustrate that they have volunteers and leadership committed to collaborating with OLI, and that they are willing and able to provide a sponsorship (currently \$25,000) to aid in supporting the OLI program. Successful applicant communities are chosen by OLI employees and members of its Board of Directors.

## OLI Program Planning Begins Early

At the beginning of the school year (September), key players from the participating community meet with OLI representatives. At this stage, plans are developed for the arts-based recreational activities that the youth from the community will later be engaged in, starting in January.

Typically, the key players involved in the program planning include school teachers and principal(s), as well as community volunteers. In the past, the OLI program has been run as an extracurricular activity. As of fall 2011, the program can be run as a high school credit course.

## Program Activities

Through the credit course, students are engaged in hip-hop dance activities, with the goal of creating a dance routine. The routine is choreographed and directed by a professional dance teacher. The teacher works with the youth in their communities for 2 to 3 days every other week, for up to 6 months (January to May/June). In between these visits, the school staff and community volunteers continue to help the youth to rehearse and complete all course requirements.

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Although dance is the main activity, students also get the chance to take part in photography, videography, painting, journal writing, and choreography, which are also showcased in Toronto.

At the end of the school year, the students travel to the Tim Horton Children's Foundation camp near Brantford, Ontario for a two-week stay. There, the youth participate in dance rehearsals and a wide range of camp, recreational and educational activities. After camp, the youth then go to Toronto to present their dance and multi-media performance at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts. To date, 87 Aboriginal youth from four communities have performed in Toronto.

### Objectives

The OLI program aims to build the self-esteem, sense of accomplishment and confidence of Aboriginal youth.

These objectives are partly reflected in OLI's program policy which requires that:

- youth attend school on a regular basis and commit to achieving good academic standing in tests, exams, and assignments; and
- youth be responsible for attending rehearsal punctually, notifying school staff prior to any absences, and for displaying positive and respectful behaviours during rehearsals.

To remain in the program and earn the opportunity to perform in Toronto, participants must follow these rules, which are further detailed and enforced by the participating community.

Many youth who have been in the program are enthusiastic about it. For instance, one participant named Roni-Lyn stated, "OLI kept me motivated to stay in school all year... it helped me learn that I can actually do something so amazing, even if it takes a lot of hard work." Anecdotal reports such as this one point to the need for research to understand how and why OLI has been successful.

### Research Efforts

Beginning in 2011, under direction from OLI staff and members of the Board of Directors, we will research the history of OLI and the ways in which OLI is able to reflect Aboriginal values. The research will involve:

- obtaining data by interviewing OLI staff and Board members
- participating in OLI teleconferences
- attending OLI performances
- reviewing OLI archives

Through this research project we hope to better understand the ways in which youth development programs for Aboriginal youth can be more culturally-sensitive and contribute to Aboriginal peoples' self-identified goals.

For example, though it is now commonly understood that self-determination is necessary for any successful health (e.g., Kelm, 1998) or education (e.g., Battiste, 2004) intervention that targets Aboriginal populations, recreation-based interventions are rarely founded in Aboriginal peoples' self-determined needs.

We are thus particularly interested to learn if OLI - which is an intervention by Aboriginal peoples for Aboriginal peoples - experiences success because of its reflection of and engagement with Aboriginal peoples' values and cultures. 

### About the Authors

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