

**Evaluation of a sports-based positive youth development program for First Nations youth:**

**Experiences of community, growth and youth engagement**

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## GENERAL ABSTRACT

In contrast with mainstream Canadian youth, First Nations youth experience many health disparities. Researchers recommended that interventions designed to promote First Nations youth development use a strengths-based lens that recognizes contextual challenges. Furthermore, leadership programming for First Nations youth has begun to show promising outcomes. The overall purpose of this research was to examine the Youth Leadership Program (YLP) program to gain an understanding of program implementation and perceived outcomes related to both individual and community development. Two studies were conducted to fulfil the research purpose. The first study applied a qualitative approach that examined contextual dynamics, implementation issues (Article 1) and perceived impacts (Article 2). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Overall, 12 program staff (5 females), one Elder (male) and 10 youth (8 females) participated in semi-structured interviews. In addition, 11 youth (7 females) participated in two focus groups. The data from the youth and staff were included in the first study. The focus group data was included in the second study. In Article 1, findings were categorized into strategies for success and challenges. The following six themes were identified within the strategies for success: (a) designing youth engagement strategies, (b) being creative and adaptable, (c) being a positive presence, (d) applying experiential learning techniques, (e) balancing the integration of culture with youth voice and (f) identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community. The three themes relating to challenges were (a) community diversity, (b) social issues and (c) staff burn-out. In Article 2, data analysis resulted in three themes that describe the perceived program effects at the participant, staff and community levels. The three major themes include: a) progressive leadership development, b) enhanced relationships and c) increased community participation.

Within the second study (Article 3), methods were based on youth participatory evaluation and Photovoice and the design included capacity building, stakeholder analysis, photo exploration and utilization-focused activities. Using a thematic analysis, five themes were identified: (a) fun and fulfilling to engage the children, (b) positive outcomes for youth leaders, (c) community impacts, (d) challenges and (e) opportunities for improvement. Findings for each study are discussed in relation to current theory and practice, and recommendations are provided for future research and programming. This research makes contributions to applied positive youth development programming, community-based research with First Nations youth, youth-led participatory research and developmental systems theory.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Often referred to as the heart berry because of its shape, the wild or natural strawberry is an important food and medicine in many indigenous cultures in North America. This little plant carries many teachings. Our Elders say, "just as the O-day'-min (heart berry) is connected to the strawberry plant by a vast system of leaves, runners, and roots, so is the heart connected to all the organs and parts of the human body... The heart berry also reminds us of reconciliation and teaches us how to maintain heartfelt relationships in our families and communities... In the words of Mohawk Elder Jan Longboat, the strawberry represents konnonronhkwa. Commonly translated as "I love you"... konnonronhkwa means caring and sharing from birth to death.”

- Strawberry teachings (Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health)

I thought the strawberry teachings express the importance of caring and community and I feel they are a good reflection of the experience I had working on this thesis. There were a lot of people that contributed to this work and I would not have been able to accomplish this without the support of several communities of caring people. Since I have been raising a young family during my studies, I have received a huge amount of support from others throughout the process – between helping with the research or taking care of the kids: it took a proverbial village.

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## **DEDICATION**

To my family: Colin, Julian, Chloe, and Heath

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**CHAPTER I**  
**INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

## Introduction

In comparison with their Canadian peers, First Nations youth are exposed to many risk factors that can impact negatively on their psychological and physical health (Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, Miller, & Morrissette, 2005; First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2012; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), 2015). Researchers have argued that a strengths-based approach that takes account of contextual challenges would be a beneficial strategy to promote the health and well-being of First Nations youth (Crooks, Chiodo & Thomas, 2010a). Furthermore, it has been recommended that these initiatives place a focus on enhancing cultural identity and empowerment (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003; Taylor & Usborne, 2010).

Positive Youth Development (PYD) uses a strengths-based approach as it emphasizes the development of assets in youth in order to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes, such as enhanced individual functioning, well-being, and success in adulthood (Benson, 1997; Lerner et al., 2006; Pittman, 2001; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray & Foster, 1998; Scales & Leffert, 2004). PYD programming is also known to foster youth empowerment and community participation (Lerner et al., 2006; Pittman, 2001; Zeldin & Camino, 1999). Researchers have begun to examine the impacts of PYD programming for First Nations youth and this strategy appears to show promise for the promotion of positive youth outcomes (Bean & Forneris, 2013; Bruner et al., 2015; Hayhurst, Giles & Radforth, 2015; Ritchie, Wabano, Russell, Enosse, & Young, 2014). The Youth Leadership Program (YLP) operated by Right to Play represents an example of PYD programming for First Nations youth.

Right to Play, an international organization that promotes child and youth development through sport programming, is currently implementing the Youth Leadership Program (YLP) in 88 First Nations communities across the country. The research presented was primarily with First Nations communities, but recognizing that there is diversity within communities, not all participants necessarily identify as First Nations. The YLP program is designed to increase leadership skills in youth and to enhance their ability to plan for the future. The overall purpose of this research was to examine the YLP program to gain an understanding of program implementation and perceived outcomes related to both individual and community development.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Current Perspectives on First Nations Health and Well-being.**

Canadian policies directed at First Nations peoples have been described as having the ultimate objective of cultural genocide (TRC, 2015). These policies have resulted in broad inequities affecting the First Nations population and a range of social challenges. The increased rate of suicide amongst First Nations youth is one of the most disturbing consequences (Canadian Institute of Child Health, 2000; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Pollock, Mulay, Valcour, & Jong, 2016).

Researchers argue that these negative impacts are the result of colonizing practices (Crooks et al., 2010a; Kral, 2012; RCAP, 1996) and there are several mechanisms that have been identified as possible causes, most notably the residential schools. Within this school system, many First Nations children experienced family separation, deprivation, racism, and abuse (RCAP, 1996). This created a disruption of family and community structures, the deterioration of parenting skills and disconnection from cultural knowledge and practices (RCAP, 1996; TRC, 2015). There is increasing evidence that this trauma and abuse is passed from generation to

generation and research has found that history of abuse (Elias et al., 2009) and depression (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2011) are related to having parents who have experienced the residential school system. More recently, research has identified that past history of familial attendance at residential schools is associated with lower self-perceived health and mental health, and an increased risk of distress, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempt (Hackett, Feeny, & Tompa, 2016).

Research has also begun to establish that a lack of self-determination and empowerment are specifically related to negative mental health outcomes in First Nations youth. Chandler and Lalonde's (1998; 2009) research on 196 First Nations bands in British Columbia demonstrates how empowerment and strength of cultural identity can benefit First Nations communities. They collected data regarding suicide rates and cultural continuity (a variable that represents the extent to which communities have control over community affairs, such as self-government). They found that over a six year period, 90% of the recorded suicides occurred in less than 10% of the communities. They also found that communities that had more cultural continuity, or communities who were more empowered, demonstrated significantly lower youth suicide rates than communities that did not.

It has also been hypothesized that a lack of cultural identification can lead to negative outcomes in First Nations people (Haggarty, Cernovsky, Bedard & Merskey, 2008; Taylor & Usborne, 2010; Usborne & Taylor, 2010). Taylor and Usborne (2010) argue that colonization can result in an unclear collective identity for Indigenous people, placing them at risk of the negative psychological consequences of a poorly defined self-concept. Moreover, they assert that Canadian practices of cultural oppression have deprived the First Nations population "...of any meaningful collective template for formulating healthy self-esteem...the end result is a focus on

immediate gratification, an absence of sustained motivation and the contemplation of suicide” (Taylor & Osborne, 2010, p.107).

Some evidence supports this assertion. For example, within a sample of Yellowknives Dene First Nations, it was found that cultural identity clarity was related to a clear self-concept which was in turn related to subjective well-being (Osborne & Taylor, 2010). In addition, enculturation, or the degree to which individuals identify with and participate in their cultural community, has also been associated with pro-social outcomes in American Indigenous youth (Lafromboise, Hoyt, Oliver & Whitbeck, 2006), as well as decreased suicide ideation in an Inuit population (Haggarty et al., 2008).

### **Positive Youth Development**

PYD is an approach that places an emphasis on positive developmental impacts and influences that lead to successful development (Roth et al., 1998). This perspective takes both internal and external developmental factors into consideration (Benson, 1997) and also recognizes that interventions must go beyond resolving youth problems in order to prepare them to successfully navigate life’s challenges (Pittman, 2001; 2003). The PYD movement developed in the early 1990’s in response to two major advancements in child and youth mental health (Lerner et al., 2005). First, theoretical advances made in developmental research supported interventions that examine individuals and their environment holistically (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2004; Roth et al., 1998; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Second, emerging research found that risky behaviours in youth were inter-related (Dryfoos, 1990) and that single problem-focused interventions were proving to be ineffective in practical settings (Benson, 1997; Pittman, 2001; Scales & Leffert, 2004).

Paraschak (2013) suggests that strengths-based approaches are a useful strategy to apply to research with First Nations communities as there are several problems that are inherent with taking a deficit perspective. She argues that the deficit perspective focuses on weaknesses rather than identifying successes. Furthermore, the deficit perspective may also lead to an emphasis on cultural differences and the promotion of division between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Finally, she identifies that focusing on deficits fails to capture a more comprehensive and holistic picture of context and events within First Nations communities.

Despite the potential of applying strengths-based approaches with First Nations communities, researchers have also cautioned against using a PYD approach in these contexts since it was developed using research that was largely based on mainstream populations (Parent, 2011; Hayhurst & Giles, 2013) and may not take sufficient account of social challenges that affect marginalized youth (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Recognizing the potential shortcomings of PYD, it is important to apply theoretical assumptions related to developmental systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Lerner & Castellino, 2002) from which the field of PYD has emerged. Developmental systems theory takes account of the influence derived from multiple levels of environmental factors, including family, community, and socio-cultural systems (Lerner & Castellino, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In addition, this theoretical approach emphasizes the reciprocal interactions that drive development (Lerner & Castellino, 2002; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). These interactions promote mutual individual and system changes and healthy development results when there is a mutually positive interaction between an individual and their environment (Agans, et al., 2014).

In examining the circumstances that affect First Nations youth, the socio-cultural system of colonial influence is of particular importance and must be considered when applying PYD

approaches within FNMI communities. Integrating First Nations strengths within research, such as connection to the land, oral tradition, and perspectives on leadership may help to oppose colonial influences. These considerations are critical in the context of PYD programs for First Nations youth, therefore it is important for non-Indigenous organizations to avoid implementing strategies that may be viewed as Eurocentric and that could serve to perpetuate colonial influence. In work applying the strengths-based perspective to examine physical cultural practices, Paraschak and Thompson (2014) recognize several First Nations cultural strengths upon which initiatives can continue to build. First, they identify a holistic approach that involves the inclusion of sport, traditional games and active living as fundamental to First Nations physical cultural practices, as well as a focus on the whole person, including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements. Second, they emphasize the strengths related to the importance and connection to family and community. Third, they include the adoption of two-eyed seeing which describes the recognition of values and insights based on both First Nations and mainstream cultures and a willingness to apply them. Finally, they highlight the dedication to self-determination and the importance of facilitating this within research and other initiatives

***Sport PYD and First Nations youth.*** A recent review examining sport and physical activity-based PYD programming for Indigenous youth found that these programs offer many positive experiences such as empowerment along with the promotion of culture and education (Bruner et al., 2015). In addition, there is an increasing amount of literature that describes successful PYD programs for First Nations youth. For example, Ritchie, Wabano, Russell, Enosse, and Young (2014) evaluated the outdoor adventure leadership experience (OALE), an outdoor adventure program for First Nations youth designed to enhance development. This program was based on a 10-day canoe trip and their findings indicated that the intervention

significantly improved participant resilience. Hayhurst, Giles, and Radforth (2015) evaluated sport programming for young First Nations women that was being implemented at an urban friendship centre. They applied a participatory action approach that incorporated Photovoice to better understand participant experiences within the program. Among other findings, they identified that cultural practices and self-determination were important components of the program. Finally, the Nunavik Youth Hockey Development Program (NYHDP) is another example of sport-based PYD programming that was implemented in Northern Quebec. The NYHDP was designed to promote youth development through education, life-skill development, and increased physical activity (Bean & Forneris, 2013). An evaluation identified that the program was successful in enhancing community impacts (Bean & Forneris, 2013; Bean & Forneris, in press) and was perceived to promote positive development for youth through enhanced leadership, positive identity, school engagement, and participation in physical activity (Bean, 2013). Based on these studies, it seems that PYD-based sport programs may be a promising form of intervention that can help enhance First Nations youth development. However, there is a need for further research. Traditionally, research related to the evaluation of PYD programs has focused on examining individual outcomes rather than exploring how a program can foster empowerment. In particular, it is important to examine how youth within a community-based PYD program can become involved in community leadership and how this can promote individual and community development.

***Youth empowerment and leadership.*** Youth empowerment has been identified as an essential component of successful PYD programs (Lerner et al., 2006; Zeldin & Camino, 1999), however, as alluded to above, it is not yet well understood how youth empowerment opportunities translate into positive outcomes. Traditionally, leadership has been defined as a

concept that integrates elements of situational capacity and power within a process of influencing followers (MacNeil, 2006). However, *youth leadership* has been identified as having a central focus on community contribution and is not limited to roles of influence; therefore it is accessible to all youth and can be applied across contexts (Hellison et al., 2009). Furthermore, it should be noted that there is significant diversity in Indigenous perspectives of leadership (Aylward, Giles, & Abu-Zahra, 2013) and these also depart from traditional western notions, typically with an emphasis on service and participatory practices (Julien, Wright & Zinni, 2010; Redpath & Nielsen, 1997) that align more with how youth leadership has been conceptualized.

It has been hypothesized that modern society is becoming increasingly complex and that youth are becoming less well equipped to successfully adapt to adult responsibilities (Benson, 1997; Larson, 2000). Researchers argue that, in contrast with the way that children were raised historically, within modern society, adolescence is marked by a discontinuity between the dependence of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood creating a gap wherein youth are not offered incremental opportunities to transition from one reality to the next (Benson, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000). Kirmayer and colleagues (2003) suggest that this situation is also the case for Indigenous youth:

[Historically,] young people played a vital role in traditional community life. The notion of adolescence as a distinct period in the life cycle between childhood and adulthood was not sharply drawn; by their mid-to-late teen years, young people were functioning as adults in the community with responsibilities for subsistence activities and raising families. The community context for the socialisation of youth has changed dramatically with colonialism. Adolescence and young adulthood have become prolonged periods with ambiguous demarcation and social status. Moving from traditional times where

‘everyone was important and everyone had a role’, colonialism has resulted in impoverished roles and opportunities within many communities, leaving youth without clearly defined direction. (p. s20)

As a result, interventions that promote youth empowerment and leadership may close this gap by providing youth with manageable developmental challenges and strengthened cultural identity (Kirmayer et al., 2003). Although recent research has begun to show that leadership-based programming for First Nations youth may promote positive impacts (Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas & Hughes; 2010b; Crooks, et al., 2015; Ritchie et al., 2014), very little, if any research has focused on understanding how such programs can impact the development of the individual in concert with the community.

***Sport for Development and Right to Play.*** Sport for Development (SfD), an approach that is aligned with the principles of PYD, uses sport to promote social development (Kidd, 2008). Coalter (2007; 2008) suggested that there are two general categories of SfD and given them the terms ‘sport plus’ and ‘plus sport’. The category of ‘sport plus’ refers to initiatives designed to increase participation in sport by reducing barriers for participation and having a focus on benefits outside of the actual sport (e.g., development of life skills, enhanced health and well-being). ‘Plus sport’ approaches use sport to draw participants to the program and to advance social change. In ‘plus sport’ initiatives the main activities are not always sport-based as the focus is more on the non-sport outcomes such as community development (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011).

Right to Play originated as Olympic Aid, an organization developed by the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee as a fundraising initiative that involved Olympic athletes to support communities in regions experiencing challenges related to conflict or social

development. Olympic Aid became Right to Play when it was incorporated in the year 2000 and began independently implementing programs. Right to Play is now a leader within the SfD movement.

In 2010, Right to Play began operations of the Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) program in two First Nations communities in northern Ontario, Canada. Since that time the program has expanded to 88 First Nations communities across four provinces. Within PLAY, there are a range of core and complimentary programs, including the After-School program, the Play for Diabetes Prevention Program, Sport for Development Program and the YLP. Each of these programs follow a play-based approach and are designed to “enhance educational outcomes, improve peer-to-peer relationships, increase employability and improve physical and mental health” (Right to Play, 2016). Within this model, Right to Play supports communities to recruit local youth workers to facilitate the program and provides 50% of the youth worker’s compensation as well as funding for program expenses. Program Officers, based in the Right to Play offices, facilitate formal training and provide on-going coaching for several communities through site visits and regular phone communication. The After-School Program is designed for children and youth aged 6-12. This program operates in partnership with community schools and implements indoor and outdoor recreation, cultural activities, support for homework, and education about nutrition. The Sport for Development Program integrates sport and play to teach leadership and life skill development. The Diabetes Prevention Program is designed to educate youth about healthy eating, physical activity and health promotion, and to support youth in becoming role models for others in their community. The YLP is designed to engage youth in leadership activities focused on organizing community events. Given this research focuses on the YLP program, the following section will provide a description of the program in more detail.

**Youth Leadership Program.** The YLP was selected as the focus of this study as it places a strong emphasis on life skill development, community contribution, and empowerment. The program also has the potential to create positive impacts for youth and community. The purpose of the program is to enhance youth leadership skills and sense of purpose in order to develop hope and planning for the future. The program includes activities designed to develop youth leadership skills within a culturally relevant context, encourage youth to apply leadership skills to developing community sport and physical activity involvement and promote youth advocacy for local community issues. The program is based on seven components: 1) inclusion of youth voice, 2) establishment of a safe and inclusive space, 3) incorporation of regular and reliable programming, 4) completion of on-going assessment, 5) implementation of three to five community events, 6) implementation of three inter-generational events and 7) supervision provided by an experienced and supportive facilitator (the Community Mentor) (Right To Play, 2013).

Community Mentors (CM) are local community members with experience in youth development programming and are typically of First Nations heritage. This CM facilitates weekly programming that incorporates energizers and supports the youth in planning community events. The educational approach is based on an experiential learning practice called Reflect Connect Apply (RCA). This is a three-step process that supports the youth in 1) learning about a new concept, 2) reflecting on the content and relating it to personal experience, and 3) applying the new knowledge to a practical situation in their life.

### **Participatory Research with First Nations Youth**

Past attempts to use traditional positivist approaches in First Nations research have not been effective (Absolon & Willett, 2004; Gilchrist, 1997). Historically, positivist research on

First Nations people has promoted colonial hierarchies and exclusion, and has had detrimental impacts on First Nations communities (Absolon & Willett, 2004) and as a result, many First Nations people have become apprehensive of research because of past negative experiences (Bennett, 2004; Boffa, King, McMullin & Long, 2011). Gilchrist (1997) identified that First Nations participants were often only involved in data collection, therefore no checks for validity and cultural relevance took place in examining the data. Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier and Pheasant (2011) provide a narrative portrait vignette of a First Nations high school principal that illustrates this point:

When you non-native researchers come into our community you need to come with your palms up and open. That shows that you come with friendship and that you want to build that connection with the community. On the other hand, if you come with paper and a pen in hand, those are tools which create reluctance: “What are you after?” “What do you want?” “Is it going to hurt me?” I think the problem in the past was that the non-native researchers didn’t have a connection with the community. They would come in at certain times and then they would leave. But to do meaningful research you have to sit down and visit. I’m not going to tell you everything unless I know you or feel I can trust you. In that sense, I think our people need to read you as a human person. That’s when the community will accept you and you are able to connect with the right people who will make your journey and the research process easier. (p. 528)

Participatory methods have been adopted as a useful alternative strategy for working with indigenous communities (Bennett, 2004). Recognizing these considerations, this research will employ participatory strategies that engage youth and community members in decision making and implementation within the evaluation.

## **Program Evaluation**

Researchers recommend that evaluation objectives be adapted to fit stakeholder and contextual needs in order to facilitate the utilization of findings (Armstrong, 2009; Bryson, Patton, & Bowman 2011; Flowers, 2010; Patton, 2002; 2015). With regards to any form of evaluation that is to take place in indigenous communities, Lafrance, Nichols, and Kirkhart (2012) argued that context, culture, and narrative should be central to the evaluation process. Qualitative research is well-equipped to support empowerment for indigenous communities as it has the capacity to more closely represent context, complexity, experience, narrative and dynamics (Kay, 2009; Smith, 2005). Furthermore, qualitative explorations of community programming can capture an important component of impact through the description of local perspective and contextual detail and by providing the opportunity to promote decolonization (Kay, 2009). As a result, this research used qualitative methods to conduct an evaluation of the YLP program.

## **Research Paradigm**

Consistent with a participatory approach and qualitative methods, this research is based in a constructionist epistemology. Within this perspective knowledge is perceived to be constructed through social exchanges (Crotty, 1998; Sparkes & Smith, 2008) and as such, can highlight contextual influences (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2000), such as temporal changes, culture and environment. Constructionist evaluators recognize that each program is connected to a diversity of stakeholders, each with their own distinct perspective and experience of the program (Patton, 2015).

## **Need for the Study**

Although researchers have recognized that youth leadership is a critical element in effective PYD programs, there continues to be a need to explore contextual aspects and implementation issues within programming (Catalano et al., 2004; Larson, 2006; Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Zarrett et al., 2009) in order to better understand the mechanisms that promote youth development within programming and the related impacts, such as at the individual youth and community levels (Hodge, Danish, & Martin, 2013; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015). Further, recognizing the importance of cultural identity in the development of positive self-esteem and well-being (Usborne & Taylor, 2010) there is a need for more evaluation of programming designed to enhance cultural identity for First Nations youth (Dell & Hopkins, 2011; Iarocci, Root, & Burack, 2009).

Within the SfD literature, there is an identified need for more program evaluation, particularly designs that capture depth and context (Levermore, 2011), examine underlying mechanisms (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011), and that privilege local knowledge and voice (Kay, 2009; Whitley, Hayden & Gould, 2015). Researchers have also called for increased evaluation of SfD programming within the Canadian context (Hayhurst & Giles, 2013) as well as the examination of whether these initiatives are effective in the promotion of self-determination in First Nations communities (Hayhurst & Giles, 2013).

Researchers have also identified that there is a need for more qualitative research and program evaluation of sports-based PYD programs for First Nations youth (Bruner et al., 2015). Further, researchers working in First Nations communities should apply methods that align with their traditions (Usborne & Taylor, 2010). For example, evaluations that take a strengths-based approach are complementary to the traditional value of respect (Lafrance & Nichols, 2010).

Finally, as mentioned above, qualitative (Smith, 2005) and participatory (Smith, 2012) research designs have been identified as beneficial approaches for working with Indigenous communities. As a result, this study design has taken the above recommendations and gaps in the literature into account.

### **Research Purpose**

The overall purpose of this research was to examine the YLP program to gain an understanding of program implementation and perceived outcomes related to both individual and community development.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

As outlined above, this dissertation is comprised of two studies from which there were three articles produced. Study 1 was an evaluation of the YLP program that applied a qualitative approach to examine program implementation issues and perceived outcomes within a cross-section of communities. The depth and breadth of data resulting from this study was too excessive to present within one article and hence the data is displayed in two articles. Article 1 (Chapter II) which has been accepted by the *Journal of Sport for Development*, focuses on understanding the strategies used by CMs to successfully deliver the YLP program as well as the challenges they faced during implementation. Article II (Chapter III), which has been published by the journal of *Applied Developmental Science* presents an account of the perceived impacts of the YLP program from CM and youth perspectives. Study 2 was an in-depth exploration of the YLP program and more specifically the youth-led community events within one community. This study integrated two participatory methods: Youth Participatory Evaluation (Flores, 2008) and Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). This study resulted in a third article (Chapter IV) which has been published by the journal of *Youth Engagement in Health*

*Promotion.* Following the three articles is a General Discussion (Chapter V) which integrates the findings from the two studies and presents overall implications, directions for future research as well as limitations of the research.

**CHAPTER II**

**ARTICLE 1 – CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS OF A SPORT-  
FOR-DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR FIRST NATIONS YOUTH**

### **Abstract**

Canadian policy related to colonialism has created substantial challenges for First Nations youth and has had a negative influence on their health and well-being. Sport-for-development (SfD) programmes are beginning to show positive impacts for children and youth internationally. This approach may also be beneficial for First Nations youth in Canada. This research evaluates the implementation of a SfD program designed to enhance leadership skills for First Nations youth. A qualitative approach that examines contextual and implementation issues was used. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a thematic analysis. Findings were organized into themes related to strategies for success and challenges. The strategies for success are broken down into the following six themes: 1) designing youth engagement strategies, 2) being creative and adaptable, 3) being a positive presence, 4) applying experiential learning techniques, 5) balancing the integration of culture with youth voice and 6) identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community. The three themes relating to challenges were 1) community diversity, 2) social issues and 3) staff burn-out. Recommendations are provided for issues related to programming and evaluation.

Keywords: positive youth development; leadership; Indigenous peoples; program evaluation; sport-for-development

## Background

In Canada, the Indigenous population is growing faster than the general population and is substantially younger with 28% being age 14 and under.<sup>1</sup> As such, they represent an important investment for the future of Canada. Despite this population growth, First Nations youth continue to be exposed to more social issues than their Canadian peers such as domestic violence<sup>2</sup> and maltreatment,<sup>3</sup> which are issues that can have negative impacts on their psychological and physical health.<sup>4-6</sup> For example, in a young Inuit population in Quebec, researchers found that over 45% of survey respondents reported having had suicidal thoughts.<sup>7</sup> Although there is a lack of research examining health indicators of Métis youth,<sup>8</sup> Kumar found that 19.6% of Metis between the ages of 26 and 59 had experienced thoughts of suicide in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> There is general agreement that these risk factors are the result of trauma created by historical colonial practices.<sup>6, 10, 11</sup> As such, it is important to understand the contextual influences that can affect programming designed to improve outcomes for First Nations youth. This article presents a programme evaluation that examines the implementation of a sport-for-development (SfD) programme designed to enhance leadership skills for First Nations youth in Canada.

Historical Canadian policy has promoted the assimilation and oppression of First Nations people through the application of practices such as the expropriation of land, dishonouring treaties, chronic underfunding, scientific exploitation, prohibition of the use of cultural practices, forced removal of their children to residential schools and systematic placement of their children in out-of-home care.<sup>6, 12-15</sup> In addition, Canadian sport initiatives were used to promote assimilation. For example, Forsyth (2007) identifies that the Indian Act influenced Indigenous sport participation, by legitimizing Euro-Canadian sports (e.g. hockey, basketball) as more

appropriate forms of sport for Indigenous people. Sport policy today continues to reproduce inequities for Indigenous people (Forsyth & Paraschak, 2013).

As a result of colonial influence, a large portion of the First Nations population live in conditions of poverty, over-crowded housing, reduced access to clean water and lack of access to public resources such as quality education. The health consequences of these conditions are exhibited in the First Nations population as there are higher rates of infectious disease, family dysfunction, maltreatment, abuse, teen pregnancy, addiction, fetal alcohol syndrome, school failure, mental health issues and delinquency. One of the most worrisome impacts created by colonial policy is the increased rate of suicide among First Nations youth.<sup>16, 17</sup> Indigenous people experience a range of health disparities that have resulted from colonial policies on an international scale. For example, in Australia researchers found that aboriginals had a higher prevalence of mental health issues than the non-Aboriginal population.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, researchers examining the well-being of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand found that well-being is lower in indigenous populations in comparison with the general population in every region.<sup>19</sup>

SfD initiatives are designed to use sport to attract participants for the purposes of promoting development outcomes such as public health and education.<sup>20</sup> Coalter uses the term ‘sport plus’ and ‘plus sport’ to describe two contrasting approaches to SfD.<sup>21</sup> ‘Sport plus’ refers to initiatives that use the sport context to promote sport along with other community development outcomes. ‘Plus sport’ approaches use sport to attract participants, but then the main programming is not sport-based. In this context, sport is used as an incentive to create engagement with the targeted population to improve recruitment and retention.<sup>22</sup> SfD appears to be a promising approach with vulnerable youth around the globe,<sup>23-25</sup> and thus may be useful to

apply to First Nations communities. For example, researchers identified that sport participation in a South African township led to the development of youth competencies including improved self-concept, discipline, group skills and respect for others.<sup>26</sup> In India, Kay found that a sports-based intervention designed to promote civic activism and leadership in adolescent women helped participants to gain knowledge and become more empowered.<sup>24</sup> In research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in Australia, Thomson, Darcy and Pearce conducted several case studies of sport programming designed to reduce social inequities that exist between the indigenous population and other Australians.<sup>27</sup> Their findings highlighted the importance of including Aboriginal representatives within program governance, developing community partnerships, empowering the community to promote sustainability and the incorporation of mutually beneficial processes. The Hokowhitu Program is an example of a sports-based positive youth development program targeted at Maori youth.<sup>28</sup> It was adapted from the Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation program<sup>29</sup> and applies a Maori learning method and other cultural concepts. The program was successful in generating positive attitudes toward school, improved coping skills and more optimistic outlooks in the participants.

In Canada, there are some sports-based development programmes that have demonstrated positive outcomes with First Nations youth. For example, in northern Quebec, the Nunavik Youth Hockey Development Program (NYHDP) is a long-standing programme in 14 remote villages designed to enhance Inuit youth development by teaching life skills, increasing physical activity and by fostering the pursuit of education.<sup>30</sup> A recent evaluation of the NYHDP identified that the program was perceived to promote positive outcomes for youth and community. Youth participants experienced enhanced leadership, positive identity and increased participation in school and physical activity.<sup>31</sup> The programme also led to a number of positive community

impacts, including improved community infrastructure for recreation, sport and enhanced community partnership.<sup>30, 32</sup> In a similar vein, Ritchie and colleagues used outdoor pursuits to promote development by implementing an outdoor adventure canoe trip for First Nations youth and found that participants exhibited increased resilience after programme completion.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Active Circle is an initiative designed to promote First Nations youth well-being through sport and recreation programming.<sup>34</sup> This programme is designed to support and provide capacity building to grassroots programming and is currently being evaluated using participatory methods. Despite these promising findings and ongoing evaluation, not all SfD programs for First Nations youth have exhibited positive impacts. For example, Galipeau and Giles' research examined Alberta's Future Leaders (AFL) program, a sport-based leadership program that is implemented by predominantly non-First Nations staff.<sup>35</sup> Through their exploration, they found two over-arching discourses that influenced the program, including 1) the notion that all youth can develop leadership skills and that 2) mentorship programming can help First Nations youth avoid negative life paths. They also found that the programme might be perpetuating differential power relationships between programme staff and participants as a result of a lack of acknowledgement of cultural differences. The criticism of perpetuating power relationships has already been raised regarding general SfD programming.<sup>22, 36-38</sup> It is also important to note that Hayhurst and Giles cautioned against using SfD approaches based on Eurocentric ideals within First Nations communities since these strategies "transmit the very values that some Aboriginal communities are actively trying to resist."<sup>39</sup>

Right to Play (RTP) is a prominent organization within the SfD movement. It originated in 1994 as Olympic Aid, a fundraising initiative that was developed by the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee. RTP's strategy was to involve Olympic athletes as ambassadors in

fundraising efforts in order to support communities in countries experiencing hardship or conflict. Olympic Aid then became RTP when it was incorporated late in the year 2000, which is when RTP began to independently implement programmes. The majority of programmes implemented by RTP throughout the world would fall under the 'plus sport' approach. Although the majority of programs implemented by RTP have been in developing countries, in 2010, RTP began operations of the Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) programme in two First Nations communities in northern Ontario, Canada. Within PLAY, there are a number of initiatives including the Sport for Development Program, the After-School program, the Play for Diabetes Prevention Program and the Youth Leadership Program (YLP). Each community that chooses to partner with RTP within the PLAY programme must choose one or more of these components. The focus of this research is the YLP programme which has recently expanded from two to over 88 First Nations communities across Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia and Alberta.

Researchers have argued that SfD programs must go beyond sport and offer a developmental intervention.<sup>22, 40</sup> This research is based on the positive youth development (PYD) framework which is grounded in developmental systems theory.<sup>41</sup> PYD was advanced in reaction to the deficit model of youth development and has important implications for perceiving children as having intrinsic potential, abilities to develop a moral identity and being inextricably linked to their environment.<sup>42</sup> Within PYD it is recognized that children and youth have a connection and bi-directional influence on their environment and thus programs and their subsequent impact must be considered within the spectrum of other system effects, including influences from family, school, friends and community. Youth leadership has been identified as an integral

component within successful PYD programs and has the potential to have an impact on youth as well as the larger community.<sup>43, 44</sup>

The overall programme objective of the YLP is to support youth in making positive contributions to their community. Through participation in the programme, youth develop leadership skills and apply them to create positive change in their community. Much of the programming includes education delivered using an experiential learning practice called Reflect Connect Apply (RCA). The RCA process involves the delivery of an educational concept. The participants are then encouraged to reflect on the lesson and connect the new knowledge with an experience they have had previously. They are then invited to apply the learning to a practical example in their lives. This approach is particularly relevant within this context as experiential learning has been found to be more accessible for First Nations youth.<sup>45</sup>

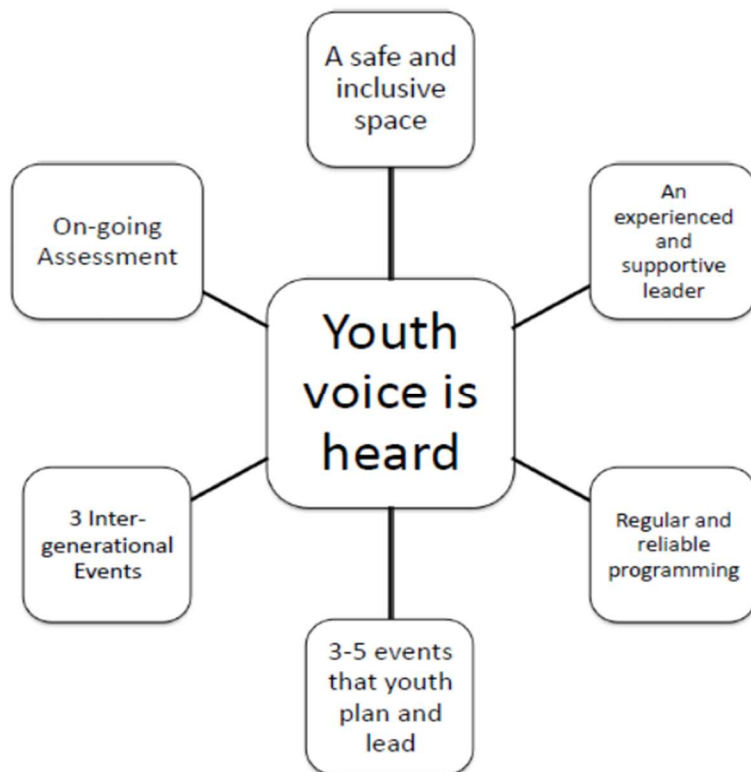
There are seven major components to the YLP (see Figure 1; Right to Play, 2013). The first component is youth voice. This component is central to the philosophy of the program. It involves the creation of opportunities for youth to express themselves and to share their vision with others. The second component is the establishment of a safe and inclusive space. This refers to the creation of an environment that is physically and emotionally safe, as well as open to a diversity of participants. This allows the participants to feel welcome and comfortable to share in the programming. The third component involves the incorporation of regular and reliable programming. This component is important for the development of trust and the progression of learning within the programme. This is facilitated through the maintenance of weekly programming at a consistent location. The fourth component involves on-going assessment. This ensures the regular incorporation of participant and community perspectives for quality improvement.

The fifth component involves the implementation of three to five community events. In this venture, youth are involved in organizing, coordinating and evaluating a community event. These initiatives allow the youth to learn by doing within a structured environment. It also engages the community and provides the youth with opportunities to develop leadership skills and confidence in their abilities. The sixth component is the requirement of three inter-generational events. This entails the implementation of three or more inclusive events that involve family and other community members. The last component involves the inclusion of an experienced and supportive worker, the Community Mentor (CM). It should be recognized that although this programme is implemented by a SfD organization, the YLP does not explicitly include sport within its design. Many of the communities relied on sport activities heavily to draw youth to the programme, while others incorporated more traditional activities to engage youth depending on local youth interests. For example, some programmes would include a basketball pick-up game as a regular element of their weekly programme. Others might not implement a sport on a weekly basis but might organize a hunting trip as one of their community events.

The CM's are the frontline staff and are responsible for delivering the YLP program, building partnerships within the community and for administering the duties associated with the program. Most CMs are community members of First Nations descent with a background in child and youth work or recreation. These individuals are trained bi-annually by RTP. This training is implemented at donated camp venues. The CMs come together for a week-long event that involves role playing, energizers and content-related workshops. These trainings are attended by Elders that lead a smudging each morning and workshops about traditional teachings. Since the majority of CMs are from the community where they work, they are often

already familiar with the youth within the community and hence with those that participate in the programme. In addition, each CM is supported by a Supervisor located within his/her own community and a RTP Program Officer that is responsible for several communities and makes regular visits to each programme.

Figure 1: The components of the Youth Leadership Program



Patton defines programme evaluation as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming.”<sup>46</sup>

Programme evaluation differs from traditional positivist research in several ways. In traditional positivist research, objectives are based on an examination of relevant literature and of gaps in the current knowledge.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, since programme evaluation occurs in an applied context and is more practical in nature, study designs are typically developed through the consideration

of programme goals and stakeholder interest. In spite of the expanding literature, researchers have argued that there is a general lack of programme evaluation within the SfD movement and that many of the existing evaluations do not provide enough depth to capture the full context.<sup>48</sup> Researchers have identified a need for increased evaluation of SfD programming within Canada<sup>39</sup> as well as a need to identify if these SfD initiatives can successfully promote self-determination in First Nations communities.<sup>49</sup> For example, Levermore has suggested that most evaluations in SfD are conducted in an exclusive and non-participatory manner, do not capture enough depth of information to represent the full program context, and apply methods that do not take into account the worldview of the participants and other stakeholders.<sup>48</sup> Scholars have also argued that there is a lack of understanding of underlying mechanisms within the SfD evaluation literature.<sup>22</sup>

In order to address the identified gaps in the SfD literature, Kay recommends the use of qualitative research that better captures individuals' perspectives, complexities within programming and contextual dynamics related to community and family.<sup>24</sup> This research addresses the shortcomings within the field of evaluation in SfD since it uses a qualitative approach that examines both context and implementation. Researchers have suggested that interventions that promote empowerment for First Nations youth may promote a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood through the provision of manageable developmental challenges and opportunities to strengthen cultural identity.<sup>50</sup> Although youth leadership has been identified as an important component of effective PYD programs,<sup>43, 44</sup> researchers have identified that there is a need to better understand the mechanisms and processes that promote positive outcomes within the programming context.<sup>51, 52</sup> Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present a formative evaluation of the YLP component of the PLAY programme that examines

contextual challenges and strategies for implementation success. The objective of formative evaluation is to examine implementation issues within programs that are in their early stages of implementation in order to apply the findings to improve programming rather than to examine programme outcomes.<sup>53</sup> Recognizing that this programme was recently initiated, the goal of this research was to explore contextual issues that affect operations within the YLP to identify what is working well and areas in need of improvement. Furthermore, this research examines the perceptions of community members who are responsible for the implementation of the program.

## **Methods**

### **Context**

This study is the result of a research partnership that was initially developed between RTP and the University of Ottawa. The project was initiated when RTP approached the University to invite the researchers to implement an independent program evaluation. Since there was no funding from RTP to support this partnership, the researchers sought and received independent research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the largest funding source for research in social sciences in Canada. Throughout the research, RTP supported the logistics of data collection and the researchers provided intermittent feedback regarding the findings and provided recommendations for programming. Researchers have recommended the use of research advisory committees in guiding studies with First Nations communities.<sup>54</sup> Researchers have also recommended the inclusion of Elders in the design and implementation of these evaluations.<sup>55</sup> In First Nations communities, Elders serve as teachers and role models and are considered to be significant community members because of “their symbolic connection to the past, and for their knowledge of traditional ways, teachings, stories and ceremonies.”<sup>56</sup> In order to support the research partnership, a research advisory committee

was created that included representatives from RTP, researchers at the University of Ottawa, Elders and external indigenous researchers. The purpose of the committee was to improve the relevance of the research designs and to ensure that community needs were addressed in the process. There were four ethical principles created to guide this study: 1) relational accountability, 2) respectful representation, 3) reciprocal appropriation, and 4) rights and regulations. The principle of relational accountability acknowledges that the researchers must be responsible for maintaining transparent and respectful relationships with everyone involved in the research. Respectful representation involves a commitment to understanding community perspectives and engaging them in knowledge production. Reciprocal appropriation speaks to the importance of ensuring that mutually beneficial outcomes are achieved through the research. The principle of rights and regulations states that the communities must maintain ownership and control of the data. This research has also been reviewed and approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board.

### **Evaluation design**

A qualitative design was used in order to capture context, description and understanding of staff perceptions.<sup>46</sup> This exploratory approach is particularly important since the programme is youth and community-led, thus specific goals were expected to shift based on context. In addition, researchers have suggested that in evaluation with First Nations communities, it is impossible to disregard cultural context as it is “critical to valid inference; programmes can be accurately understood only within their relationship to place, setting, and community.”<sup>57</sup> Recognizing that the programme was in its early stages of implementation, a formative approach was used so that the data collected could be used to improve programming rather than demonstrate impact.<sup>53, 58</sup> LaFrance and Nichols suggest that evaluation should emphasize

continuous learning and focus on process as it is complementary to indigenous ways of knowing; as such, “evaluation should reflect insights and understandings captured in the sense of becoming.”<sup>55</sup> More specifically, this study follows a constructionist epistemology since the aim is to better understand the individual perspective of the CMs on the programme. This perspective assumes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction<sup>59, 60</sup> and reflects the surrounding context.<sup>46, 61</sup>

### **Participants and procedures**

The lead researcher attended five Community Mentor Trainings and one Youth Symposium to recruit participants and conduct interviews. The recruitment was initiated in February of 2012 and was completed in February of 2014. Interviews were conducted with 11 CMs and one Elder. Five of the participants were female and five of them had been involved with the programme for more than one year. The participants worked in 14 different communities from across Ontario (one individual worked in three different communities and another worked in two communities). Four of the communities were designated as Southern, six as Northern, three as fly-in and one was unknown. Each Community Mentor Training was attended by an Elder, and he was interviewed during one of the trainings. Interview participants are identified by codes (Community Mentor = CM, Elder = E).

As described above, the data for this research were collected at the trainings and symposiums with a broad cross-section of CMs. In these circumstances, there was no individual community that was involved in the research. For non-geographically based evaluation, researchers have suggested that it is important to recognize service organizations as a community of interest.<sup>62, 63</sup> In this case, our “community” was the collective of CMs who had their own shared perspectives, values and experiences that brought them together.

The qualitative method used in this study was semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews are useful in this context because they are a method to capture individual perceptions of the programme, including their experience and understanding.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, story-telling is valued as a traditional First Nations method of sharing knowledge.<sup>64-66</sup> LaFrance and Nichols suggest that it is important to tell the program's story when doing evaluation within indigenous communities and they include story-telling in their Indigenous Evaluation Framework as an essential element.<sup>55, 57</sup> In line with this tradition, qualitative semi-structured interviews have the capacity to capture stories and detail-rich information. An interview guide was developed and included questions regarding the overall programme context and structure (e.g. please describe the youth you are working with), perceptions of success during implementation (e.g. what was your greatest success?), challenges experienced during implementation (e.g. did you experience any difficulties implementing the programme?) and community involvement (e.g. are there any other people/partners/organizations who should be involved in the future who could make the programme better? Who?).

In order to make sense of the data, a thematic analysis was used.<sup>67</sup> This process involved six phases that include: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming and 6) producing the report. During the familiarization phase, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts and observation notes in order to have a relatively clear idea of the data set as a whole. During this stage, notes and highlights were made in order to keep track of initial impressions and ideas. Initial codes were created using QSR NVivo. Through an iterative process, codes were organized into larger themes based on inter-related meaning and the themes revised and re-organized based on reflection and review. To enhance methodological rigour, analyses were reviewed by the

University of Ottawa research team. Furthermore, the researcher presented the initial analyses to CMs in order to obtain their feedback regarding whether the results were capturing their experience accurately. Themes were revised and refined based on the feedback received.

Many researchers have argued against the rigid application of fixed criteria in judging qualitative research methods.<sup>68, 69</sup> Sparkes and Smith recommend the use of flexible lists in order to judge the value of qualitative research.<sup>70</sup> This strategy allows researchers to identify criteria of quality during the research process, and as such, these criteria “act as a starting point for judging a certain kind of inquiry, but these may not apply on all occasions and other criteria can be added to or subtracted from them depending on the circumstances.”<sup>68</sup> Tracy’s eight "Big-Tent" model represents a universal set of criteria that can be applied to complement the research context.<sup>69</sup> The model also distinguishes between indicators of quality and best practices. Applying this relativist perspective, our research demonstrates several strengths highlighted within this model, including credibility, significant contribution and topic worthiness. Credibility is demonstrated through thick description. The elaborate narratives provided by the CMs provide a comprehensive description of their experiences and the programming environment. Credibility is also reinforced through the member reflections provided by participants regarding their perceptions of the initial analyses and feedback regarding effective knowledge exchange and utilization opportunities. Evaluation research is uniquely situated to provide a significant contribution. The process of evaluation allows the close examination of contextual issues and the ability to provide concrete and practical recommendations both for the programme under study, as well as for related interventions and initiatives. The criterion of topic worthiness is fulfilled since the subject of this research is of such considerable importance. Given the issues that face First Nations youth today, including elevated rates of suicide in many communities,<sup>17</sup> exposure

to violence against women,<sup>2, 71</sup> and criminal involvement,<sup>72, 73</sup> it is critical to examine the best ways to alleviate these disparities. Recognizing that community empowerment has a considerable relationship with youth suicide<sup>17</sup> and that these issues require community-driven solutions,<sup>74</sup> it is of crucial importance to examine community-based leadership programming to identify what works and what is in need of improvement in order to share lessons learned to support program and policy development.

## **Results**

The analysis resulted in the development of two overarching themes. The first relates to strategies used to implement the programme that were perceived as being successful and the second related to challenges experienced in implementing the programme. Within these two overarching themes a number of sub-themes arose which are described in more detail below.

### **Strategies for success**

The CMs talked at length about the different strategies that they believed helped them to have a successful programme that the youth enjoyed and to overcome barriers. Success was subjectively defined by the CMs and based on their understanding of the context and what they perceived as contributing to an effective and efficient programme. Some of these strategies included creating individual strategies for empowerment, identifying new contextually adaptive activities, integrating their community culture and making local connections to enhance the programme. The strategies are broken down into the following six themes: 1) designing youth empowerment strategies, 2) being creative and adaptable, 3) being a positive presence, 4) applying experiential learning techniques, 5) balancing the integration of culture with youth voice and 6) identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community.

### *Designing youth empowerment strategies*

The core philosophy of this programme is leadership and the development of independence among youth and their communities. Many of the CMs endorsed this approach and developed their own methods to promote youth empowerment. One CM talked about how the youth develop confidence through the skills that they learn and by taking ownership for the program.

It's easy for me to do it all, but then they have to do it. And do the work for it, and then overall it makes them feel that they are capable of doing better things. (CM2)

Many CMs were able to individualize their support based on the needs and strengths of individual youth. They created learning opportunities that were at the right level of challenge so that the youth can develop important leadership skills and experience. For example, one CM described how his participant played the Easter Bunny at their community Easter event, a role that was challenging, yet achievable for her:

She was huge and that's just a little bit out of her comfort zone. Like she does have that personality, but yeah, she did and she did it really well. (CM10)

Many of the CMs also discussed the importance of respecting the youth and the importance of providing an autonomy-supportive environment. As one CM shared:

I'm not forceful or aggressive with anything that I try with people. Because it's for people's own choice to do what they want, right? So even when it comes to the youth... I just always keep in mind, equality and respect. There's nothing I can make you do that you don't want to, but if we have the respect for each other, you might give it a try. (CM1)

The Elder also discussed the importance of the programme being youth-led, rather than based on standardized best practices from abroad.

I would be worried about [RTP] and be troubled about them if they say, 'Well here's what we're going to do: We've got programming from the international corporation ... this is how we did it in other countries. This is how we're going to do it to you.' Oh shit. Here we go again, some experts found a way to solve our problems and make our kids

healthy and brighter and happier... We need to include them everywhere... the children, we have to hear them and be sensitive to them. (E)

### ***Being creative and adaptive***

CMs also found ways to build on what they had in order to meet the needs of the programme. For example, one CM did not have access to any kind of traditional sports facilities, so they managed to create a hockey rink out of a garage:

There's an industrial garage that's not being used, that doesn't have a door. If we put boards up, it's not going to be legal size but we'll have an indoor hockey rink. (CM5)

In another instance, a CM described using the fire hall to host some of his activities: "We don't have any kind of community center or anything rec-based or anything... when there is actually something like the garage of the fire hall, they take the trucks out and they'll have a community meal in there." (CM1)

Most CMs appreciated that they were able to adapt the program to fit their community needs better: "this new [module] is actually better because it's more flexible" (CM8). Another CM stated,

This is how I achieve my goals, using 75% [of the programme module] and maybe adding 25% of my own thoughts because I know how my community is and you know best for your community, you know... It's where you have to become creative in how to make it work. Without you putting in your imagination to what you're doing, it's not going to work. (CM6)

### ***Being a positive presence for the youth***

CMs also found creative ways to overcome some of the behavioural issues they were aware of with youth in the community. Most of them had an empathetic approach that recognized that these youth may be dealing with very stressful and serious situations in other parts of their lives and that these behaviours may be the result of trauma. This is the approach one of the CMs uses that she described:

Give the kids the trust and the security that you will be there for them, even if it's outside of the time frame that you're supposed to be there... Go above and beyond what they expect from you. (CM5)

Similarly, another CM emphasized the importance of really being there for the youth and supporting them.

I just come from a very positive way too. Like, just want to be as positive as I can for young people because you don't know what kind of story they're coming from, or how the day went or whatever... So whatever I'm doing, I just try and be really positive, like I'll use quotes, I'll use songs, I'll use whatever, pictures, stories. I'll invite people in who are funnier than me. (CM7)

Some participants were struggling with other mental health issues, such as anxiety. This CM shares how he tried to support the youth by helping them cope with anxiety and helping them better understand their surroundings:

They have anxiety problems, I've noticed. So things that are a potential danger for them, cause them to have pretty severe reactions... And so I do a lot of talking with them and explain things to them when it comes to that. Like they walk down the road, and they'll hear something in the bush and be scared of what it is, not knowing what it is. But if you can explain it to them and tell them, 'This is your land, your home. There is nothing here that you should be scared of. This is for you.' (CM1)

The Elder who was involved with the programme also emphasized the importance of being open-minded and compassionate with the youth in order to learn from them.

Being open is really important. Being non-judgemental, being kind and compassionate... Be patient and tolerant and most importantly, do it with a sense and spirit of love and compassion. (E)

### ***Applying experiential learning techniques***

One way that CMs made the programme more appealing to youth was through finding activities that provided education without creating a classroom environment. The CMs felt that many of the youth did not feel comfortable or would lose interest in typical educational activities.

My kids were interested in the fun games and the fun team-building exercises and you know, drawing or something. They just didn't want any bookwork, you know? "Please don't give me any paper to write on!" You know? That sort of thing. (CM2)

Another CM stated,

It's their choice to run it, rather than me telling them what to do. Because I don't want to make them feel like they're in high school, where they're actually told what to do, how to do it. I like to give them the choice, where they feel like they can do what they want, but responsibly. (CM4)

As a result the CMs talked about how a lot of the lessons were intermingled with other activities or provided within applied or experiential contexts without using traditional learning resources.

When we're cooking and stuff, and they're prepping, we'll bring up the things that are in [the programme module] with them, and just have like open dialog. But we're touching on all the points that it says in the sessions... but it's not sitting down at a table... it's more about the evening and getting it done and they don't even realize that they're talking about it. (CM9)

### ***Balancing the integration of culture with youth voice***

Sometimes the CMs had to feel out how the youth felt about involving culture in the programme activities. They had to create a safe space to allow the youth to explore their traditional culture. As a result, CMs used different strategies to bring culture into the programme:

Whenever we do some activities, I always ask the kids, 'Do we want to do something cultural?' And if they're 'Yes, but we don't know how to do this' and I say 'Oh well, we can find a way to do that'. (CM2)

Another CM commented that,

Some of the young kids, may not follow their parents or grandparents walk or ways, but they're going to become adults. And to me, I believe in giving them choice, allowing them, educating them, let them know the knowledge of both ends, and they'll have to make their choices. Pushing one or another on to them is just, you're asking for a push back. (CM3)

Another CM noted that,

I like to make them comfortable. So, whenever I do an event or a gathering or a meeting with them, I kind of like set the stage, so I'll have snacks, I'll have water, I'll have music playing that I think they like, or like my favourite music to make me comfortable because I get nervous too and I'll, if I need it, I'll bring my bundle, so, my smudge, my feather, that kind of stuff. (CM7)

Building on youth cultural interests is also an important way that the CMs increased youth participation and created momentum in the programme. Connection to the land and nature is an important value within First Nations cultures, so many of the youth were interested in more traditional outdoor sports rather than team sports. Some community programmes were built around those kinds of activities:

It clicked really fast with the boys because we're all hunters and fishers and stuff like that so they really looked to me to, to have those kinds of conversations and stuff like that. So it happened really fast once they knew that we have similar interests, it was snap of a finger and they were interested... So that's what I'd like to do is organize a hunting trip in the fall time and maybe some kind of fishing derby as an intergenerational event in the summertime or something like that. (CM1)

Another CM said of activities,

The other thing is to get outside... I grew up outside and I just loved it, so I just want to try and bring that back, so all of my gatherings or meetings or whatever, there's always something to do outside. (CM7)

### ***Identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community***

Ideally, the programme was developed to involve and engage the community along with the youth participants. CMs were able to achieve this in a variety of ways. Some were able to find volunteers who contributed to the programme in important ways. Others were able to develop partnerships and coordinate with other programmes and institutions within the community to make the programme stronger and more integrated. This is an example of how one of the CMs involved law enforcement to create a more positive relationship between the police officers and the youth in his community:

In our communities, I try to involve the police ... most of our kids growing up have been either ripped away from their home or seen a parent or their family member, or even, on

the street were taken away by the police and not understanding. So they get the idea that they're only there to make them sad or hurt them or take away my family or myself. So I involve them with all the activities, and they're great. And now the kids are building that relationship and that comfort zone to say 'hey this isn't a bad person, they're here to protect me.' (CM3)

Involving other programming has been another way that CMs create more diversity in their programme, engage with other community organizations and integrate cultural learning. For example, one CM would involve other local organizations to come and facilitate sessions that included content that supported youth empowerment and that were aligned with program objectives, such as the local YMCA or the National Child Benefit program:

We've just been bringing in people and making time for whatever else, like sexual health or the gambling awareness or traditional teachings. Just a whole slew of things. (CM10)

CMs also found community members who were willing to help with the programme on a volunteer basis, by contributing their time and skills to help with community events or regular programming. Here is an example of how the school bus driver provided transportation support within one programme:

With the after-school programme, these kids didn't have a way home. ... And the education director said, 'Yeah, don't worry about the fuel and the cost, if [the bus driver] is willing to do it, we're going to do this.' (CM3)

Sometimes, CMs were able to engage volunteers on a more casual basis. They would find people who were willing to offer their help occasionally, without getting closely involved with the programme:

I've had people offer their support when they can or when it's convenient for them and when it was during an event and they can help do a clean-up or something physical like that. Like they don't mind lending a helping hand and they're just not interested in running programmes in the community and so I don't ask too much of them but I'm happy for the respect that they show me. (CM1)

## Challenges

There was a range of different challenges that were perceived to have affected the implementation of the programme, but there were several that were more salient and widespread among the different communities. The three themes that emerged under challenges were community diversity, social issues and CM staff burn-out.

### *Community diversity*

Since this programme is being implemented across 88 different communities that range tremendously in context and character, there were many instances where the programme could not be transferred to a new community without having to make substantial adjustments. These differences had a great impact on operations and created a fair amount of stress for staff and CMs. One example that was often mentioned was the diversity in culture among the communities. Many communities really valued traditional beliefs and customs, while other communities were not as comfortable with them. This meant that programming could not always be communicated in the same way and activities needed to be adapted to fit the context so that participants and community members could see value in the programme:

Each community is so different, right? And that's what I find a challenge too sometimes, because I work in three different communities, and all three are so different. You know, some follow cultural ways, and others do not. So you know, it's hard sometimes to keep track of everything. (CM2)

Even within communities, there was a huge range in the representation of cultures making it important for CMs to acknowledge differences within their own groups:

They could be Lakota, they could be Cree, they could be anything... there's a lot of awakening going on when it comes to the culture, there's a lot of spiritual awakening... People realizing the things that we need to do as a people to re-vitalize our way of life, our culture and that's a huge part of it, is our ceremony, and everybody seems to be finding it in a different place. And so when we come back to our own home, it creates a bit of a barrier in the fact that we don't have the same teachings, we don't have the exact same ceremonies. (CM1)

Another variable that demonstrated a huge contrast between communities was geography and infrastructure. This influenced the operations of the programme since not everyone had the same access to resources. Some of the communities that were served by the programme were located within urban centres, while others were on reserve. Some of the more remote communities were only accessible by boat, airplane or ice road. As such, programming had to be planned around unpredictable weather conditions: “We have the ice road and we don't know when the meltdown is going to come and everything like that.”(CM3) Another CM noted,

We have the limitation of how remote we are. We don't have a school, we have portables. We don't have a gym. We don't have a ball field. We don't have a soccer field. We don't have a hockey rink. (CM5)

These differences in infrastructure created a barrier for some programmes in terms of finding a consistent venue for sports and other activities. This forced some CMs to run their programming out of fire station garages and public health building basements, while others had a full community centre available with a gym and youth room equipped with state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment. For some CMs, the scarcity of venues within their community created logistical problems when they were trying to run activities.

The biggest problem would have to be, venue, a place to have the activities. Because there's always people that are wanting a gym, struggling to get a place. Or if we want to do this, and there's something going on, that they don't kind of overlap us, they'll chose the bigger. (CM4)

Some CMs were even struggling with community crises related to flooding and sewage problems conflicting with their scheduled programming: “We were supposed to do a basketball tournament, and these guys were going to run it, but that's when the evacuation happened and so we had to close everything.” (CM11)

### *Social issues*

Another challenge for program implementation concerned social issues that can affect First Nations communities; these are the problems that have been linked to colonial policy and practice, including domestic violence and family breakdown, widespread addictions, lateral violence and behavioural issues.

Knowing the events and evolution of our people, as aboriginal people. You know the assimilation policy, the Indian Act, the residential schools, and all these other things that happened, alcohol and drugs, family violence, family breakdown... There's some alienation, some fragmentation. It's not a cohesive community family here. (E)

A CM noted that,

There's so much bullying happening right now. There's suicides that take place, there hasn't been any lately, thank goodness. You go on Facebook and adults are attacking other adults. (CM2)

There is also a lot of stress placed on the CMs because many of the youth themselves are dealing with issues related to addiction and mental health:

Some of the activities would draw certain things out of them that would bring out an emotional response that could be of a negative perspective that maybe the youth could have... and I did witness some of that. You know the way some of the youth were acting. Their emotions start going, so that's when I had to go and talk to the health professionals and then start talking to psychologists and NADAP, like for drugs and alcohol and get a better understanding of the behaviours. So I took mental health first aid because of that. So I felt that some of these things were inappropriate for me to go out and do it, right? Because I might draw something out that's not supposed to be there. (CM9)

Because of the prevalence of social issues within the families, it was challenging for the CMs to engage with and involve the parents and other family members:

We have a lot of, the generation of ... 25-40 are the ones most affected by the OxyContin. ... so they, for the most part, have lost their children in some way shape or form... So grandparents at the age of 65 are raising 10 year old kids. Usually they all live in the same house because we don't have enough houses but they're legal guardians a lot of the time... These are the kids that are in my programme. And a lot of those grandparents don't speak English, they only speak Cree. (CM5)

This created problems increasing participation with the youth, finding volunteers and developing greater community involvement. There was also a lack of trust because of past experiences with western institutions and programmes. This created barriers in developing relationships and increasing involvement:

Our communities are so closed up to the Westernized, because of the fact that they've been hurt so many times - we're talking residential schools, sixties scoop... they're still healing. So, we need to bring these places and these organizations to a lot of them, to build the trust... Sometimes you forget, they won't even go to people in their own community, because of their fear of the confidentiality being broken. (CM3)

### *CM Staff burn-out*

Since there are so many demands placed on the CMs, many of them feel very overwhelmed within their role. This stress is related to the challenge of meeting all the requirements related to the position, as well as all of the barriers they need to overcome in order to get their programme running smoothly. As a result, many CMs were unable to remain in their position and this affected the staff turnover rate. One of the CMs discussed some of the issues he was experiencing, including difficulties obtaining outside funding and completing the administrative work:

We try to do as much possible, of getting out there, getting other funding and whatnot. [RTP] support us greatly with everything, but it's the financial part. Because we're so busy doing programming, event planning, working, you know, so many hours, that trying to do our own grants, is difficult. Like, my normal week, is usually from 8:30 in the morning to 6:30 at night. That's just with the lessons during the day, and the after-school programme. That's doesn't include me going afterwards and doing the extras of doing my paperwork, and getting things, or doing the extras to make sure that the kids are set up. (CM3)

One CM was working with three different communities and described the added strain of driving in dangerous conditions along with all the programming:

So I get up early in the morning and I spend all day there, and I don't do just RTP program, we'll do Lacrosse programming and I'm also a Skate Canada coach, so I'll do Learn To Skate sessions. So I utilize everything in one day, to do it. But it's the travel.

That's what really drains me, is the travel, because it is so much. And winter road conditions... icy conditions, accidents all over. And that's what you have to face so, it's not just the stress whenever you go to the communities, because they're really thankful that I'm there, but it's just getting there and having pulled muscles up here because you're just like this, eh? [demonstrates gripping the steering wheel]. (CM2)

Another CM discussed how many of their colleagues feel the same way about the pressure of the job:

That was a big thing at our last CM training, we had a sharing circle with an Elder and it just came out, like, blah, everyone's so tired and over-worked. Everything is just, go, go, go, I mean, it's just like so much to do. (CM10)

### **Discussion**

This paper describes an evaluation of contextual issues associated with the implementation of a SfD leadership programme across diverse First Nations communities. A number of successful strategies that the staff employed in order to improve programme implementation were identified. These strategies were related to adapting the programme to meet participant, community and contextual needs. However, a number of challenges encountered while implementing the programme were also noted. Below is a discussion of the results of this study in regards to previous research as well as recommendations for both researchers and practitioners working in the SfD field.

The main approach of this programme is to develop leadership for youth and communities. The results regarding youth empowerment strategies highlight the importance of this strategy since many of the CMs felt the leadership component was a key to the success of the programme. They felt that this approach helped to get youth engaged and facilitated the achievement of their goals. There is a wealth of research that highlights the benefits of promoting leadership within PYD programs.<sup>43, 44, 52, 75</sup> Relatedly, researchers have identified that First Nations communities with more influence over their own community affairs exhibit lower youth suicide rates than those communities with less agency over community affairs.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore,

Hayhurst and Giles suggest that within the field of SfD, the state discharge of authority over programming may create more opportunities for First Nations communities to employ self-determination.<sup>39</sup>

The descriptions of balancing culture with youth agency also reinforce the importance of leadership development. The CM narratives highlight the importance of community agency over a standardized emphasis on historical cultural tradition. This suggests that contemporary community values and experiences should be acknowledged and valued whether they align with traditional practices or not. This is substantiated by other research in the SfD field that underscores the importance of participatory approaches that highlight local perspectives. Hayhurst, Giles and Radforth applied a participatory strategy that employed sharing circles and photovoice with young First Nations women participating in sport programming at an urban friendship centre.<sup>49</sup> Although they found that cultural practices were important, their findings also indicated the need for the First Nations youth to be empowered and to highlight their specific perspective. Kay also underscores the importance of advancing local knowledge and how this can help to decolonize SfD research.<sup>24</sup>

One way that SfD leadership programmes for First Nations youth can foster leadership is to create more advancement opportunities for community members such as the youth participants and CMs. For example, there have been examples where youth leaders have been hired as CMs, as well as CMs promoted to Program Officers. This is also an important way to strengthen internal organizational capacity regarding indigenous knowledge. In other studies, researchers have specifically recommended recruiting indigenous staff within organizations that aim to promote leadership with First Nations youth.<sup>35</sup> In addition, new recruits from the mainstream culture would benefit from indigenous knowledge and sensitivity training as part of their

capacity development. Cultural sensitivity training has been identified as an important organizational need within other First Nations research as well.<sup>10, 35, 76</sup>

Another notable strategy that was implemented is to deviate from a western pedagogical style and toward a more experiential learning environment. Researchers have identified that experiential learning is a preferred learning style for First Nations youth<sup>45</sup> and that classroom-style learning experiences can be less applicable to life on reserves.<sup>77</sup> Researchers recommend that hands-on and group-work related activities should be maximized in order to enhance the students' learning environment.<sup>78</sup> Much of the programme curriculum is centred on energizers and play-based activities that allow learning to be facilitated in an informal and fun setting. This style of learning has been identified as a best practice with experts in child and youth participatory engagement.<sup>79-81</sup>

The results of this study highlight the importance of being creative and adaptive to contextual needs. The CMs found many creative ways to adapt community infrastructure to incorporate activities and events. They also shared strategies they used to adapt the program to meet community needs. These are important considerations that can be applied when implementing other SfD leadership programmes within First Nations communities. This strategy has been supported by research. For example, researchers have suggested that contextual influences may lead to different developmental outcomes and that sports programming should be tailored to meet individual youth needs.<sup>82</sup> Parent suggests that in order to better serve First Nations youth, programmes and services should incorporate youth perspectives and cultural contexts.<sup>83</sup> Recognizing that some First Nations youth may have a stronger affinity for traditional sports such as hunting and fishing, rather than typical western team sports is an important consideration to make in programme design. For example, outdoor adventure-based

programming has been demonstrated to be successful in increasing the resilience of First Nations youth<sup>33</sup> and is reflective of the First Nations traditional value of connection to the land.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, being a positive presence for youth was identified as an important way to help youth to get engaged in the program. There are numerous studies in PYD programming that have identified having a caring adult as a fundamental program component.<sup>43, 52, 84-88</sup> This approach would be particularly important when dealing with youth who may be coping with mental health issues and might be exhibiting negative behaviours or experience anxiety in new situations. The CMs emphasized the importance of taking an optimistic, compassionate approach and providing a secure environment that creates the space the youth need to feel safe and welcome.

Many of the perceived challenges identified by CMs are supported by research evidence. Researchers have recognized that there is considerable diversity among Canadian First Nations communities.<sup>12</sup> According to Statistics Canada, there are more than 600 First Nations bands, speaking 60 different languages.<sup>1</sup> First Nations youth continue to be exposed to elevated rates of domestic issues, including increased rates of maltreatment in child welfare cases<sup>3</sup> and high rates of spousal violence.<sup>2</sup> Finally, evaluations of other strengths-based programming for First Nations youth have encountered similar challenges such as obstacles related to engaging parents and difficulties making life skills transferable for youth.<sup>77</sup>

## **Recommendations**

Based on the feedback related to the challenges, there are several recommendations that can be made. Since CMs are feeling overworked and stressed in their roles, it is important for them to receive more support. This can be facilitated through several strategies. Resources can be developed and tailored to provide more targeted and relevant information for each community. For example, success stories for northern communities dealing with cost savings challenges can

be compiled and applied to these specific situations when they arise in future. Many First Nations youth are suffering from historical trauma.<sup>13, 89</sup> As a result, many CMs felt unprepared to help the youth cope with the distress they were experiencing. Identifying community supports who can help the youth in these areas along with offering some introductory training in managing trauma would be helpful in these situations.

Technology has been used in very innovative and participatory ways in order to enhance mental health outcomes with youth.<sup>90</sup> Since many youth, staff and community members are familiar with and use smart devices and social technology, these tools could be incorporated to facilitate programme operations and improve efficiency. This programme is being implemented across a wide geographic area and this technology could be used to bring CMs together more regularly. It might also be useful to partner CMs who are experiencing similar contexts and challenges. This strategy would be particularly effective for new CMs who could benefit from the knowledge of more experienced CMs. Setting up forums and encouraging regular communication among CMs might help them to feel more supported and to develop informal knowledge as in Communities of Practice<sup>91</sup>.

Another way that technology could be used to support CMs in their roles would be to automate some of the administrative work. Targeting and automating monitoring that can be rolled up to programme staff more easily would reduce the workload. For example, one strategy would be to use photos taken during group nights to create a headcount and facilitate attendance monitoring to capture participation rates. Dictation software (which is available on many mobile devices) and online survey software would also make monitoring and evaluation more efficient.

There are several recommendations that can be made for other evaluators working to examine youth programming in First Nations communities. Relationship building is a very

important step in the research process.<sup>63, 92</sup> It is a necessary pre-requisite for identifying individuals with in-depth knowledge and experience in the programme. It is also important for adaptations in data collection procedures. For example, interviews can be refined so that the terms and language used are more relevant to the context and orientation of the participant. Ongoing engagement with community members is also essential for having a meaningful understanding of the experiences of those connected with the programme. Since each community was so different, it took time to be able to develop a clear picture of the dynamics within each situation.

It is also very important to collaborate with other indigenous leaders.<sup>57, 92</sup> This research benefitted from the insight and creativity contributed by First Nations leaders, which includes Elders, indigenous researchers both from within and outside of the research team, and indigenous leaders within the RTP organization. These individuals made some of the best contributions to the design, execution and conceptualization of this research. Many of the insights that contributed to the findings were achieved through in-depth discussions and reflection with the Elders and First Nations colleagues. Many of the community connections were also made through the direct support of First Nations leaders within RTP.

When working with communities, it is important to look for unique opportunities to contribute through ways such as research capacity-building<sup>10</sup> and grant-writing.<sup>63</sup> In this setting, the CMs had different needs depending on their situation. Some needed help with grant writing within their fund-raising efforts. Others needed support finding programme materials or exploring outside events that would benefit their programme participants. It is also important to identify the unique needs of the CMs regarding knowledge exchange. Taking the time to discuss

and identify the content and format of the findings that would be most useful for them would be a key component in developing an effective partnership for programme evaluation.

In communities with an interest in outcome evaluation, it is recommended that programme staff pilot an adaptable measure that was developed for First Nations youth such as the Aanish Naa Gegii.<sup>93</sup> This would allow them to examine developmental changes created by the programme. Using photovoice and participatory evaluation methods to examine a handful of events more in-depth would be a useful way to get a stronger understanding of youth perceptions and experiences within the programme. Moreover, this method has been used successfully with other First Nations communities<sup>94, 95</sup> and youth.<sup>93, 96</sup>

### **Strengths and limitations**

This formative evaluation was responsive to local needs since it placed a focus on community member perspectives.<sup>24</sup> Given that Indigenous cultures value the tradition of story-telling as an important method of sharing knowledge,<sup>64, 65</sup> this research emphasized story-telling through the use of rich narrative descriptions that detail personal experiences within the programme. Finally, this research benefitted from the engagement of an advisory committee composed of Elders, indigenous researchers and indigenous programme staff. They all played a pivotal role in guiding the research development, providing feedback regarding methods and offering insight to improve contextual understanding.

This study is limited as it examines programme perceptions rather than direct observations. Future examinations of programme operations would benefit from a more comprehensive description of process issues including information regarding participant exposure, partnership development, community infrastructure and programme activity logs. Developmental evaluation is an approach that is well-suited to complex and changing

environments as it allows for innovation in methodology.<sup>58</sup> Researchers have identified this is a valuable approach to evaluation within contexts that use youth engagement to guide programming<sup>97</sup> as well as within community-based research with First Nations youth.<sup>98</sup> This research would have benefited from using a developmental evaluation approach, which is a method designed to examine complex and dynamic initiatives in order to capture emerging and unanticipated developments<sup>99</sup>. Since the evaluators were working externally, there was not as many opportunities to work closely with the communities and to collaborate on a timely basis which is required in this form of approach. Finally, this evaluation was designed with the intention of applying the findings to practice, both within RTP and for other organizations implementing leadership programs for First Nations youth. Reports were provided to the organization on a regular basis and presentations of the findings and recommendations were provided throughout the term of the research. However, as a result of high turnover in leadership as well as difficulties maintaining pace with program operations, the findings were not applied to the extent that was originally intended. In the future, it may be beneficial to implement strategies that focus on capacity-building and that integrate research and evaluation within internal monitoring practices. Consequently, organizational infrastructure and knowledge can be improved, increasing the opportunity for the utilization of findings.

### **Conclusion**

This research applied a qualitative approach that highlighted local community member perceptions and examines both programme context and implementation. Results indicated that there are many challenges that must be navigated in order to successfully implement Sfd leadership programming for youth within First Nations communities. Recognizing this adversity, frontline staff have developed creative strategies to overcome programming obstacles including

making adaptations to the programme, creating community partnerships and supporting youth empowerment. These are important strategies that are applicable within SfD programmes designed to enhance leadership for First Nations youth. If other organizations incorporate these components, they may be able to create a programme that is truly integrated with and led by the community. Lessons learned may also be useful for researchers and evaluators working in these contexts.

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**CHAPTER III**

**ARTICLE 2 – EVALUATION OF A LEADERSHIP PROGRAM FOR FIRST  
NATIONS YOUTH: STORIES OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**Evaluation of a Leadership Program for First Nations Youth: Stories of Positive  
Youth Development and Community Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

First Nations youth experience many health disparities in comparison with their mainstream Canadian peers. Researchers have recommended that interventions developed to enhance health and well-being for First Nations youth apply a strengths-based approach that acknowledges contextual challenges. This article uses a qualitative approach to examine the perceived impacts of a program designed to enhance positive development and leadership in First Nations youth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with front-line staff and participants. A thematic data analysis resulted in three major themes that describe the perceived program effects at the participant, staff and community levels. Findings are discussed in relation to current research and theory, and recommendations are provided for programming and future research. Leadership programming for First Nations youth may be an effective way to promote development across many levels of stakeholders.

Keywords: positive youth development; First Nations youth; leadership; program evaluation; community engagement

## Introduction

In Canada, many health disparities exist between Indigenous youth and their non-Indigenous peers. These are exhibited in a broad range of health and social indicators such as lower academic success (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2014), developmental disabilities (Fuchs, Burnside, Marchenski & Mudry, 2005; Werk, Cui & Tough, 2013), and inflated rates of some mental health issues such as attention deficit disorder (Baydala, et al., 2006), mood disorder (Lemstra, et al., 2011) and suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). These difficulties experienced by Indigenous youth are the result of Canadian policies targeted at the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), 2015), including the restriction of language and cultural practices, and the division of families and communities.

The policies designed to oppress the Indigenous people of Canada originated in the 1800s and included the establishment of reserves, the criminalization of ceremonial practices, the development of aggressive child welfare policies and the creation of residential schools (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; TRC, 2015). Residential schools, designed to “civilize” Indigenous children and youth, have had one of the most negative impacts on this population: “Many students were permanently damaged by residential schools. Separated from their parents, they grew up knowing neither respect nor affection. A school system that mocked and suppressed their families’ cultures and traditions destroyed their sense of self-worth.” (TRC, 2015, p. 3). These discriminatory practices continue today, for example, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal recently shared a ruling that found First Nations families receive less support for welfare services on-reserve than in other parts of the country (Globe and Mail, 2016).

To enhance the health and well-being of First Nations youth, researchers have recommended that interventions use a strengths-based approach that acknowledges contextual risk factors and places an emphasis on individual potential (Crooks, Chiodo & Thomas, 2010a) and empowerment (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003). Positive youth development (PYD) is a promising approach for at-risk youth that places a focus on empowerment and community development. This approach recognizes that both individual and environmental factors affect development (Lerner, et al., 2006) and it advocates for the development of assets in youth to increase positive outcomes such as enhanced functioning, well-being and success (Benson, 1997; Lerner, et al., 2006; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray & Foster, 1998). The PYD focus on community development is particularly relevant for First Nations youth since their culture is based on communocentric values (Kirmayer, Tait & Simpson, 2009). Furthermore, PYD programming that incorporates leadership development has begun to show promising impacts in the First Nations population (Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas & Hughes (2010b); Crooks, et al., 2015; Ritchie, Wabano, Russell, Enosse & Young, 2014). The purpose of this article is to explore the experiences of youth and Community Mentors (CM) within a PYD program designed to increase leadership skills and to examine perceived program effects from the youth and CM perspectives.

The PYD approach was developed as a result of advancements in child and youth mental health (Lerner, et al., 2005). New research suggested that risky behaviours in youth were inter-related and often preceded negative outcomes (Dryfoos, 1990) and interventions targeted at decreasing risk behaviours were not successful in helping youth develop the necessary assets to succeed (Benson, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Moreover, the concept of PYD has developed in part as a result of developmental systems theory, which suggests that reciprocal relationships

exist between individuals and their contexts (Lerner, et al., 2005). When there is a mutually positive interaction between an individual and their context, healthy development can occur (Agans, et al., 2014). Despite the potential of using PYD programming within First Nations communities, researchers have also cautioned its application since it is an approach that was developed using mainstream populations and concepts and may not accurately frame the developmental realities experienced by First Nations youth (Parent, 2011; Hayhurst & Giles, 2013).

Furthermore, researchers have suggested youth leadership development is an important component of effective PYD programs (Hellison, Martinek & Walsh, 2008; Lerner, et al., 2006; Zeldin & Camino, 1999). MacNeil (2006), defines leadership as “a relational process combining ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) with authority (voice, influence, and decision making power) to positively influence and impact diverse individuals, organizations, and communities” (p.29). However, research suggests that the concept of leadership is understood differently within an Indigenous context. In their study, Julien, Wright and Zinni (2010) interviewed 15 Indigenous leaders within public and private sector organizations. Participants had a range of community backgrounds including Métis, Mikmaq, Iroquois, Ojibwa and Mohawk. All of the participants shared an Indigenous concept of leadership that emphasized service. They understood leadership as a communal and iterative process whereby many individuals fill leadership roles and then pass them along to others. One of the participants provided an analogy to describe the communal nature of leadership: “If you watch the buffalo, one will go over the cliff and they will all follow. Geese are different. Everyone takes a turn leading the formation” (p. 120). This implies that in this perspective, the followers apply critical thinking, rather than blindly following a leader. It also suggests that leadership responsibilities and decision-making are shared. The Indigenous

leaders also used a long-term perspective in their decision making and some applied the “seven generations” concept to create a time frame for their intended impacts.

Related to leadership, community empowerment and self-determination has been identified as a very important influence on the health and well-being of First Nations communities. Chandler and Lalonde (1998; 2009) collected data on 196 First Nations bands in British Columbia regarding suicide rates and cultural continuity (a variable that represents the extent to which communities have control over community affairs, such as self-government). They found that communities with more cultural continuity, or communities who were more empowered, had significantly lower youth suicide rates than communities that did not. Other researchers have also documented reduced suicide rates in response to community activism in an Inuit population (Kral, 2012).

Researchers have identified that there is a need for more studies that examine leadership within First Nations communities (Julien, et al., 2010) and that there is a lack of research that examines youth leadership development (Gould & Voelker, 2012; MacNeil, 2006). However, researchers are beginning to demonstrate positive outcomes in leadership programming for First Nations youth. For example, Crooks et al. (2010b) conducted an evaluation of the First Nations Cultural Leadership Course, a peer mentoring program that incorporates cultural activities within a course component and conferences for grade eight students. The goal of the program was to increase school engagement and ease transition into secondary school. They collected data regarding the mentees academic achievement and found that their school performance improved. They also found that the program demonstrated good attendance, high rates of retention and peer mentors expressed enjoyment of their leadership roles.

In another study, Ritchie and colleagues (2014) evaluated the outdoor adventure leadership experience, a 10-day canoe expedition designed to develop life skills. Results indicated that participants demonstrated significantly increased resilience from pre- to post-intervention, however these gains were not maintained at follow-up. Researchers speculated that decreased scores may have been the result of influences related to being back in the family context.

Galipeau and Giles (2014) used a case study approach to examine the Alberta's Future Leaders (AFL) program, a sport-based leadership program. This initiative is implemented primarily by mentors from mainstream ethnicity and uses sport and recreation to develop leadership skills for First Nations youth. Applying a Foucauldian analysis, they found that the program is influenced by two discourses: mentors can help to lead Indigenous youth away from a negative life path and leadership development is possible for all youth. They also argued that the program may be perpetuating hegemonic relationships due to the lack of acknowledgement of cultural differences.

The Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations is an initiative designed to promote healthy relationships, cultural connectedness and academic success for First Nations youth (Crooks, et al., 2015). The initiative incorporates multiple programs, including school-based mentorship, culturally relevant conferences and leadership programming. Using a case study design, Crooks and colleagues found that the initiatives had an impact on participants' relationships, sense of belonging, academic success, confidence and leadership. The previous studies provide evidence that leadership programs may be beneficial for First Nations youth, however, there is still a need for more research.

The program of focus for this research is a youth leadership program developed by the Sport for Development organization, Right to Play. The organization originated in 1994 as Olympic Aid, an initiative that involved Olympic athletes to promote fundraising efforts to support communities in developing regions. They began independently implementing programs in the year 2000 and now have a presence in 21 countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, North and Central America. The Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) program commenced operations in 2010 and has since expanded to 88 First Nations communities across Ontario, Manitoba, Albert and British Columbia.

This program includes several initiatives, including the Youth Leadership Program (YLP), which places a focus on developing youth advocacy skills. The YLP is designed to enhance community relationships, increase positive healthy behaviours and decrease risk-taking behaviours in youth. The program is implemented over the course of the academic year (September – June) and uses experiential learning as an educational approach. Although the program was not designed using an evidence-based approach, the program was built on several components that include mentorship, community event planning and implementation, weekly programming and on-going assessment. Programming generally takes place twice a week after school and is implemented by Community Mentors (CM). These individuals are community members primarily of Indigenous heritage, and they are responsible for frontline service provision. Within these roles, they facilitate skill-building energizers and learning activities that help youth take ownership of program activities and to identify and pursue program goals through the design and implementation of community events. Spearheaded by an Indigenous Director of the PLAY program and in response to feedback from CMs, the Right to Play staff also developed an Indigenous Knowledge guide. This manual was designed to be used in

collaboration with community Elders and cultural leaders to support the incorporation of First Nations cultural traditions into program activities. The program logic model also includes short-term outcomes related to CM knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. For more details regarding the program, see (Halsall & Forneris, 2016).

### **Need for the Study**

There is an identified need for more evaluation that examines contextual factors within PYD interventions (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2004; Larson, 2006; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Zarrett, et al., 2009) and for research that applies methods that are complementary to First Nations traditions (Usborne & Taylor, 2010). Specifically, researchers have argued that there is a need for more research that places an emphasis on local knowledge (Kay, 2009; Whitley, Hayden & Gould, 2015). Furthermore, researchers have recommended that in light of the importance of the traditional value of respect, evaluations with Indigenous people should focus on individual strengths to identify growth: “Within the traditional concepts of the living universe and relationship, respect is a moral imperative... This core value of respect requires that the uniqueness of every person be honoured by valuing his or her gifts” (Lafrance & Nichols, 2010, p.23). Recognizing the potential for applying a PYD approach to interventions with First Nations youth and the need for more program evaluations that examine contextual influences in leadership programming, this article examines the perceived impacts of the YLP through a qualitative approach.

## **Methods**

### **Evaluation Design**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of the CMs and the youth through their participation in the YLP program. In evaluation, research questions are often driven

by stakeholder needs and methods should facilitate the utilization of findings (Patton, 2002). Researchers recommend the use of a formative approach when evaluating programs that are in the early stages of implementation rather than demonstrate impact (Chen, 2005; Patton, 2010). Within the formative stage, programs can benefit from information that explores strengths and weaknesses in order to make program improvements (Patton, 2002). Perceived positive outcomes offer an indication of processes that may be most effective within a program. Qualitative research is well-equipped to capture early perceived impacts to identify if they align with program objectives and to detect un-intended program effects as well. As such, this study used a qualitative approach to explore perceived outcomes.

A constructionist epistemology informed this study, which suggests that knowledge is constructed through social exchanges (Crotty, 1998; Sparkes & Smith, 2008) and highlights environmental influences (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2000), such as community dynamics, cultural frame and geographic climate. Patton (2015) argues that a constructionist evaluator identifies that diverse program stakeholders have distinct experiences of a program and maintain their own individual perspectives. Recognizing this, it is important to apply an approach that is designed to better understand their diverse realities. In order to capture this range of experiences, this evaluation included participants from the staff and client stakeholder groups.

Story-telling is an important mode of knowledge sharing for First Nations communities (Julien, et al., 2010; Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, & Pheasant, 2011). In order to align with this tradition, this evaluation facilitates the sharing of stories about individual experiences through the use of semi-structured interviews that emphasize thick description and personal understanding (Patton, 2002).

Finally, qualitative exploratory research is well-equipped to provide rich descriptions of local perspective and in doing so, describes an important component of impact and provides an opportunity to promote decolonization (Kay, 2009). Since qualitative research has the capacity to provide holistic descriptions of an insider's perspective, youth's and CM's lived experience of program activities can be captured and shared within the findings. Additionally, the results can be used to provide the audience with vicarious experiences of the participant's story and this can promote empathy and understanding (Lawrence & Paige, 2016; Phillips, 2013; Schank & Berman, 2006). This, in turn, can support decolonization as it can enhance understanding of the First Nations reality, particularly with non-First Nations audiences. This might also enhance mainstream recognition of First Nations cultural strengths and diminish negative perceptions of First Nations culture (Paraschak, 2013).

### **Participants and Procedures**

In order to collect data, the lead researcher attended five Community Mentor Trainings and one Youth Symposium. These events are opportunities for formalized education of staff, as well as to develop relationships between Right to Play staff, CMs and youth from across the program locations. She also visited with two communities. The Community Mentor Trainings included CMs from all communities. The Youth Symposium, included youth and CM representatives from northern (north of Nipissing) and fly-in communities. The two community visits were to southern communities. The lead researcher was a participant observer during all events. She participated in workshops and conducted interviews during downtime. All communities were invited to participate, however there were challenges obtaining parental consent for the youth. A total of 22 research participants were interviewed. This included 12 CMs and ten youth. Nine of these participants were male, and the individuals were from 16

different communities across Ontario. Interview participants are identified by codes (CM = CM, Youth = Y).

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Patton (2002) suggests that this form of interview is well-suited to learn about individual perceptions regarding experience. The interview guide for the CMs included questions about their general experience (e.g. How was your experience being a CM in the YLP? Any stories/examples?) and perceived impacts (What was your greatest success?) Interview guides for youth included questions regarding their experience in the program (What kinds of things do you do at program?), their satisfaction with program activities (What do you like best about the program?) and their perceived impacts (Has anything about you changed because of coming to the program?).

The researchers used a thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) in order to derive meaning from the data. This procedure consists of several stages including: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generation of initial codes, 3) identification of themes, 4) revision of themes, 5) definition and specification of themes and 6) development of the report. During the familiarization stage, the first author transcribed the audio recordings and loaded them into the QSR NVivo program. She also reviewed her observational notes and the transcriptions multiple times to develop a better understanding of the data set as a whole. Notes and highlights were created to track initial ideas and to identify early patterns. These were refined through an iterative process, whereby initial codes were organized into larger themes based on meaning and inter-connection.

Preliminary analyses were conducted after the first round of interviews and codes were adjusted and revised as more data were collected in subsequent rounds of interviews. Research team members reviewed themes and provided feedback regarding theme descriptions and

relationships. CMs also provided feedback regarding the accuracy of the analysis and offered advice regarding the best application of findings with regard to utilization and stakeholder communications. Since this study was part of a larger research study that examined implementation and perceived preliminary outcomes, the themes presented in this article represent a sub-set of the results that are relevant to the outlined purpose of the study.

This research was a part of a larger study designed to examine programming to promote First Nations youth development. Within this research, multiple designs were used to examine issues related to implementation, outcomes, stakeholder involvement and community development. Throughout this study, the researchers attempted to follow the OCAP principles (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession; First Nations Centre, 2007) as closely as possible. For example, a research advisory committee composed of researchers, program representatives and Indigenous leaders guided the research in order to improve relevance, accountability and to prioritize community needs. These individuals met with the research team multiple times and gave feedback and suggestions to guide the design, methods and ways to interpret the data. For example, a standardized measure to examine cultural identity was removed from an earlier design in order to allow for a more open-ended, community-based exploration of culture. Since much of this research was conducted outside of community at program trainings, we identified the collective of CMs as a “community” as well. This was based on the understanding that service organizations can represent a community of interest with shared values and experiences (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC, 2014; McHugh & Kowalski, 2009).

With regards to trustworthiness, the method of flexible lists (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) was applied to highlight the quality of research. The determination of quality through flexible lists allows researchers to use criteria for assessing trustworthiness that are not pre-determined prior

to the commencement of the study (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Researchers have argued that the benefit of applying flexible lists allows the researcher to develop criteria during the implementation of a study and facilitates creativity and innovation (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For example, as the research progressed, the researchers developed a better understanding of program and contextual needs. Furthermore, since the program is very adaptive, the priorities often shifted throughout the course of the study. As a result, the methods were adapted during the research process and the related criteria to assess quality evolved.

Using the method of flexible lists, we were able to identify several criteria that draw from Tracy's (2010) "Big-Tent" model, including worthy topic, credibility and significant contribution. The topic of this research is of significant importance given the critical challenges that face First Nations youth (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Turner, 2014) and the need for strengths-based program evaluations with First Nations communities (Lafrance & Nichols, 2010). Credibility is established through the thick description provided by the participants' accounts of their experiences. Furthermore it is reinforced through member reflections on the preliminary findings and triangulation between the interview data and participant observation at the events and within communities. Significant contribution is provided through the practical applicability of the findings to the current program context as well as to related research and policy.

## **Results**

The data analysis resulted in three major themes: 1) progressive leadership development, 2) enhanced relationships and 3) increased community participation. These three themes describe the perceived program effects that relate to the youth, CM and community levels.

### **Progressive Leadership Development**

The CMs and youth shared many stories about a broad spectrum of perceived positive outcomes related to enhanced leadership and development that upon analysis seem to be the result of a developmental progression. Four subthemes emerged that represent this progression and were identified as increased youth engagement, youth life skill development, enhanced youth confidence and CM skill development.

***Increased youth engagement.*** One of the perceived youth outcomes that represented a more preliminary program achievement was engagement, both in the program and the community. At the start of the YLP program many of the CMs really struggled in involving youth participants on a regular basis. Many had to implement programming for extended periods of time before they began to see regular participants in their activities. One CM discussed the barriers that some youth are dealing with in their lives and the length of time it can take to really get someone engaged in the program. He also felt that the consistent engagement of youth was one of his greatest achievements within the program. The findings regarding increased engagement represent an early progression for youth that is typical in the early stages of youth programming involvement.

I had a few [youth participants] that I had such a hard time with, but they kept coming...it took almost that whole year for them to open up and to be a part of a group and to show that they enjoy themselves and not be a disturbance...But it happened and I'm really glad that it did because they turned into awesome, awesome key roles in the program...The greatest success that I would say right now is the commitment I have from those 11 students. Because they've been working since the summertime so they've had approximately six months of the commitment for the Pow Wow. (CM1)

Some CMs acknowledged that some of their youth had come a long way in taking the first steps to participating in a program designed to make positive community contributions. Some of the youth had been involved in very anti-social activities and to remove themselves from those situations and begin placing their energy into positive contributions was a significant personal development. One CM shared a story about a young boy in her program and the obstacles he has overcome.

I have this one young lad, he is really hardcore. He's been involved in gangs, and bullying, and beating people up. You know, a really tough guy... And it took me about six months to get this kid into the program right? Now he never ever misses it. And the one thing I was told was that he also brought another boy to our sessions, and they used to have a gang, but now the gang has split up, because these two boys are with Right to Play. (CM2)

Along with increases in program engagement, the CMs also reported that many of the youth who were participating in the YLP program also started to engage in school more as well. As one CM shared:

[Youth name] is like, she used to be a bad ass... suspended once a week, all year. Kicked out of almost every high school there was, you know what I mean? Barely any credits. She was bad, it was bad. Now, she's gotten 4 credits last semester. Her attendance has sky-rocketed. And yeah, she's doing good this semester, so it's like a huge change in her. (CM10)

***Youth life skill development.*** Many of the outcomes discussed by the CMs and youth related to life skill development that seems to have resulted due to continued engagement in the program. Researchers have defined life skills as “those skills that enable individuals to succeed

in the different environments in which they live such as school, home and in their neighborhoods” (Danish, Forneris, Hodge & Heke, 2004, p. 40). In this case, program activities created opportunities for youth to practice skills that would be useful for them in their everyday lives, such as taking responsibility, goal setting, and public speaking. The skills the youth obtained also reflected an ordered progression, whereby skills developed earlier in the program were often examples of early learning and becoming adapted to community involvement, whereas later on, the youth were able to take more responsibility and were more capable of driving program objectives and coordinating complex community events.

In the program, the youth are provided incremental opportunities to make decisions and take control of program activities. This allowed the youth to progressively take on more responsibility.

I think this program’s unique. What I really like about it is, I’m not making the decisions, it’s the kids, the youth who are making the decisions. So it’s not like me saying ‘ok, in 2 weeks, let’s run a hockey tournament’ it’s more that I do a lot of exercises with the kids, and like we’ve got that one thing, with bullying, the bullying issue, so ‘what kind of events or activities can YOU run for people in your community to help prevent these sorts of things?’ So it’s more or less, the youth are the ones who are taking ownership (CM2)

The youth also expressed how the program had an impact on taking responsibility as they were the ones always making the decisions and not the CMs. “When we plan events, you have to make decisions then, like the date, what are the prices, what’s going on” (Y6).

Many of the youth explained that many of the skills they developed were related to planning and supervising events. For example, one youth stated “I learned... how to set up

programs and stuff, like doing the basketball program, counting money, and stuff” (Y7). While another youth shared how event planning developed other capacities, such as the ability to work as a team and communications skills:

I guess it has helped me become a better leader. Like our events that we have held, they’ve gotten better because we’ve learned a lot, by planning the stuff... I guess it’s not so much leadership, but like communication and working as a team and being able to bring everyone together to work as a team. So we just do different stuff that helps communication and working with other people more and not just being like a one man show. (Y5)

It was evident from the CMs that the youth were successful in developing these skills as they discussed how the youth, particularly those who had been involved in the program longer, were able to run complex activities and take charge of younger participants. One CM shared “My 5, 6 and 7s and 8s, actually run now the after-school program. They organize the games with the youth because with the after-school stuff that we do runs from grade 3s, to grade 8s” (CM3). While another CM explained, “Running the events over and over... that’s just how it is now, ‘We [the youth] are going to run an event. I’m responsible for it.’ So they take on the role” (CM10).

Moreover, one CM talked about how it is important to build mutual trust with his youth to take responsibility. He shared a story of how he was called away from a fundraiser and left his youth in charge of the money. He was pleasantly surprised by how they took responsibility for the event.

I ended up coming back after the BINGO was over and the kids had already come together as a full group and run the canteen themselves and dealt with the money and

stuff like that and everything was good and accounted for... And I was really amazed and I was really happy and it was one of those times, um that I really... I was impressed by the trust that I can give them. (CM1)

Some of the youth also learned to take responsibility for and contribute to the well-being of others. Some youth talked about how they would try to teach their siblings the values they were learning in the program, like setting a good example and encouraging them to be more active: “I gained a lot, like a lot. Things that I can learn, and do it on my brothers, like show them how to do things and teach them and stuff. Like, I try to be a good role model” (Y7). Similarly, another youth shared how he would encourage his brother to be more active, “I always go to my mom’s and my little brother is always sitting inside playing video games and try and get them to come outside and play ball hockey or basketball or something” (Y5).

As mentioned above, one of the other life skills the youth developed within the program is goal setting. Many of the program activities revolved around a planning stage and then an implementation stage. It was necessary for youth to set goals before each of their community events. The youth would then work towards these goals through fundraising and event planning. One CM talked about how this process unfolds using an example of a field trip.

We give them something else to look at and to do, right? And that was with the program. We gave them something consistent, something structured, gave them something else to believe in, something else to think about, we gave them some dreams. Because they’re thinking about, ‘You know what, I’d like to go to Canada’s Wonderland.’ As an example. So, now that they have the opportunity and that carrot sitting there that they can go to Canada’s Wonderland. Now they’re not thinking about video games. They’re thinking

about how to get there and how we're going to raise the money to make that happen.

(CM9)

In addition, some of the events the youth were planning involved long-term goal setting and planning to implement.

I think our major one [community event] was our powwow in June that we organized.

The whole YLP group organized it, it took us like the whole year to fundraise and come up with all the money and plan this whole thing out. (Y8)

Another skill practiced within the YLP program is public speaking. This is an important skill as it imparts the ability to communicate your opinion to others as well as to provide the opportunity to influence others to believe in your perspective. One CM talked about how they scaffolded this skill so that the youth would have the opportunity to practice in front of increasingly broad audiences

They're ok talking in front of our group. And sometimes we'll bring guests in, so now they're talking in front of someone else. And then they tell me, 'Oh I got 100% on my presentation at school'. Like awesome, because they do it here! (CM10)

One youth discusses how she improved her public speaking skills and demonstrates also how she is able to cope with stress and learn from her performance experiences. She expresses that she knows there is a learning curve to improving public speaking skills and that her nervousness will sometimes come back. She is able to rationalize her stressful experience and look positively at the next opportunity to perform.

I think I've really learned to speak in public. I was never able to do that. I'd be standing there and I just wouldn't speak, my face would just... I could just feel the blood draining from my face but now it's just like 'this is easy!'... There'll be those odd times when it

happens to me and I'll be like 'oh, that just happened to me again'. Then I'd just get over it and be like 'there'll be a different time, I'll do better next time. (Y8)

***Enhanced youth confidence.*** As a result of having the opportunities to be engaged in the program, the youth recognized that they were improving their own abilities which consequently enhanced their confidence. They were also provided with opportunities to share their perspective and influence programming decisions so that they felt that their opinion was valuable: "I've become more comfortable, I don't know how to describe it. I just be more comfortable with even helping other people and speaking in front of people" (Y5). One CM talked about how her youth feel really accomplished and proud when they complete an event.

What I've noticed is they take things much more seriously. And when it's all over and done, they seem so extremely proud of themselves. Like, each time you do an event, afterwards, there's such a positive outcome. They're so proud of themselves, they're like 'I did that!' And then they want to do more, which is great. (CM2)

One CM shared a story about how his youth felt much more confident after participating in the program for a few months. When he first came, the youth were not comfortable enough to share their ideas and contribute meaningfully to program development. After a few months, they became confident enough to become active participants and to become involved in directing a complex and high profile community event.

When I first came and they were shut down quiet, wouldn't say 'booty' or anything. And now we're in January and last week we were planning a huge intergenerational event for the community and they were popping out, sticking their hands up and giving answers on what they want to do and how they need to get to it. (CM3)

Similarly, another CM shared a story about one of his youth who was too anxious to leave her own home for a period of time and who later was able to perform a short presentation in front of a large group of strangers:

They got up in front of 120 people and 80 of which were their age. They said their names, where they're from and a few things that were interesting about their community. So, to me, just watching that was one of those proud moments when I just think back to when they said 'there's no effin way I'm going to do that'... Like one of them at one time had a problem where, uh, I didn't see her for a while and apparently she was like in her room for pretty much two weeks... She didn't have it in her to face the music, whatever it was that happened... So she would go to the kitchen to eat and she would go to the bathroom and she would be in her room. And that's the only place she felt comfortable. (CM1)

Another youth shared her experience of how just being a part of the group helped her to realize her value: "You know your worth more, when you're here in this program. When you have people looking out for you and caring for you and telling you right from wrong. It's like, yeah, you definitely know you're worth more" (Y4).

Another shared her experience of how the program helped to build her confidence and expand her social network.

[I learned] to be more outgoing and enthusiastic, because I wasn't like that before the program. I wasn't very out there. I was more like, keep to myself, be quiet and just don't talk to anybody pretty much. I had like my own little group of friends like maybe just the four of us. That was like... I only had four friends. And those were the only people that I would talk to outside of my house. (Y8)

***CM skill-development.*** The program also had positive impacts on many of the CMs. These individuals are members of their community and were often closely connected with the youth in the program and affected by local events. The majority of the CMs were youth workers who were involved in recreation programming. When discussing with the CMs their overall experience in the program, they were also able to develop some practical skills of their own through the implementation of the program. The YLP was implemented in a staged approach whereby new CMs worked with a more structured model and more experienced CMs were allowed to have more flexibility with program activities. As such, many of the CMs learned about program design as they became more experienced in the YLP: “[We] become better facilitators, understand ourselves more, understand the youth more. We’re building something, and I think that’s a feat in itself” (CM9).

We started off doing practicals, learning how to facilitate and critiquing each other, and stuff like that. And that’s what we started off doing... When it comes to this, we’ve graduated and we’re at a point where we get to design our own program. Because, in a sense, we’ve mastered that module-type situation... so now we get to design it ourselves. (CM1)

Within the program, there were some examples of former youth leaders who had been hired as CMs, as well as CMs who were promoted to Program Officers. These individuals were able to expand on their skill sets and take on positions within the organization of increasing responsibility. One of the CMs talked about how they need to have more opportunities for advancement. Through this progression, local CMs and their communities would have increasing control over the program direction, promoting community empowerment.

They need to be brought to another level, where they're the ones that are organizing the trainings and then you just keep building on top of that... what that looks like, I don't know, whether that's saying, you here in (Name of Community) , you're going to host a training for, you know, 6 of the communities around here... and you're going to have a program officer, you'll have staff to help you out, but it's your training, like it's your training. So you need to design it, you need to create it, what are the important skills, what are the essential skills you're teaching... In a way too, it's also handing over everything, right? (CM12)

### **Enhanced Relationships**

Many of the youth and CMs felt that relationship development was an important outcome of the program and both groups shared positive experiences of developing new social connections through their participation. Some of the youth felt that this was one of the best parts of participating in their group. "I think it's just coming out, like with a bunch of people and just gathering together and having fun, basically. That's what I like about it" (Y6). Another youth expressed the following:

What I like best is that it's like, the kids that have come here, we've just developed such a close bond, we're so comfortable... having that close friendship with the regular people that come is like, I don't know, it's like there's always somewhere to turn to. (Y4)

Some youth shared stories about other participants' personal growth as a result of the relationships they developed in the program.

My brother is actually here, [Youth name], and he never used to talk to people that much. He just like zones out and stuff. But now he's like starting to make a lot of friends and he's like talking a lot, having fun. (Y1)

CMs also felt that relationship building among youth was an important outcome from the program. One shared his perspective regarding how his youth developed friendships and a group identity that they would not have had without being part of the YLP. By sharing the same group sweater or t-shirts, this group belonging extended outside of the program environment, at their local school. The youth were able to proudly display their group identity among their peers at school and this helped to strengthen the bond they shared.

So, when we have a group like Right to Play, and we all have our sweaters and things like that, it brings them closer friendships. Like some of them, like within the first year, there was a few, maybe 3 or 4 months in, they start taking the bus in. People that they've lived beside their whole lives and then they start taking the bus together, sitting on the bus together, eating lunch together at school. And then we got t-shirts and everything, and they're wearing their t-shirts at school and they're wearing their sweaters and they're talking to these people and the whole social net. It all brought them together. (CM10)

Some youth also shared that, although they knew many of the other youth in the program before it started, they only became friends as a result of participation "like [Youth name], I knew her, I didn't really talk to her much, but now she's one of my good friends. Same with [Other youth name]. And it helps, made a bunch of new friends" (Y5).

Many CMs also benefited from developing relationships through the program. Often, CMs were able to connect with other CMs for support. This was particularly helpful for them when they were dealing with stressful situations or looking for support in overcoming program challenges. Many of these relationships were built during the CM trainings.

We always had the idea that, you know, we're stuck out in Brantford at this Tim Horton's camp for a week, with no civilization. And we joke around, I mean, we used to make the

best out of it. We used to just play games, and have fun, and really get to know each other. (CM2)

Another CM discussed how sharing the challenges they were all facing at the trainings really helped bring the group together to be a stronger support system for one another:

I realized that everybody here [at the CM training] is having the same problem. That's why I felt like, I just let it out. I was kind of hiding it, containing it. I was thinking 'Oh man, I'm probably the one that's doing the worst job here'. But after I've seen all that, I felt better. I thought it was just me but, everybody is going through it, so it was more of a big support system. (CM4)

Similarly, another CM stated:

Even with myself, one of the mentors, opened my eyes to one of my own struggles I was having, without, without even knowing it... And I mean, we build relationships here too, it's amazing. So, it's great for us as well. (CM3)

Some CMs built on their relationship to create partnerships between their communities.

Their youth would come together and facilitate events on a regular basis.

In [names of two communities], who did a tri-sport together after the youth symposium action plan and now they meet up every other week and they do sports together and they live about 45 minutes away. They basically took it to the next level where they were doing something and incorporating the youth on a regular basis using their own resources from the community. Same with [names of two other communities] who regularly combine their activities. (CM12)

## **Increased Community Participation**

The program was not intended to affect youth in isolation. It was designed to also have an impact on the greater community. As a result it was not surprising to see that a theme that emerged was related to the community and was comprised of two subthemes. This was demonstrated in terms of the realization of an 1) increased sense of community and 2) greater partnerships among community members.

*Increased sense of community.* The CMs discussed how the events created through the YLP created space for community members to be together and share an experience together and enjoy each other's company. This provided the opportunity for community members to develop and strengthen relationships.

It has a sense of community, like we can all come together and no one's really uncomfortable with coming and sitting at a table with whoever shows up beside them. They know who it is. They're not afraid to talk to people, or talk to whoever's coming in. So it's kind of like everyone's always looking for a reason to get together and go out and do something. So when we do events, it's nice to see them come out and just be relaxed and having a reason to come out. So the more events we can create, the more people can get out to be with each other, rather than just being in their family. Because it brings all the community members together, all the families together really. (CM10)

In addition, CMs spoke about how the process of having the youth plan and coordinate the events brought the community closer as the community members were able to witness the positive contributions the youth were making to the community. Furthermore, these events create a forum for all ages to come together, including youth, adults and elders.

Us being out in the community during BINGO - there's elders, there's community members, there's even people from outside of the community, who come in to play BINGO and stuff like that. To see the youth in action: working, counting money, serving people, and just kind of, doing something. They can see what's going on. There's not a time that they're wondering what they're doing, because the youth are right in front of them. So there's no negative talk about the youth, when they're right there doing positive things. (CM1)

***Greater partnership among community members.*** Another community outcome that was facilitated by the YLP program was community partnerships. Some of these partnerships were informal, involving voluntary contributions from individual community members. For example, CMs shared stories about community members providing support through the provision of transportation and building a venue.

In one of my communities, the kids in (name of community), the bus takes them home after school and you know, they're spread out away from the school where they live... Well you know, the bus driver volunteered to take them back after the program is done, and you know, she's off-duty. (CM3)

Our heavy diesel mechanic, a random person in the community ... he's like, 'there's an empty building that's not being used'. It's an old garage... 'If we put boards up, it's not going to be legal size but we'll have an indoor hockey rink and I'll just string lights around the top and it will probably cost me about 1000\$ to do. I'll do free labour, don't worry about it.' So the kids have a hockey rink. (CM5)

Some partnerships were more formal, involving the coordination of programming and organizational support. Many of the CMs received support from the local schools and other

youth programs: “The relationship that I have with the school has been unbelievable. They give me class curriculum time to do my YLP so that I don't have to do it on Saturdays or evenings and weekends” (CM3).

Some of the programs received support from local Activators. These are youth trained by Motivate Canada who are coordinating sport and physical activity initiatives within their communities: “The Activators in the community, the recreation department and the schools are the ones that have really strong partnerships with Right to Play” (CM2).

Some CMs were able to establish partnerships because of the positive reputation they had created for the program. Other local programs would provide in-kind support, content and other resources to expand the program.

People heard about the success of the program and seeing the benefits of all the things that we've done and they just start coming in. Like offers of different types of workshops to be led. They want to give us different resources. They want to pay for different things. (CM10)

## **Discussion**

This study used a qualitative approach to explore perceived impacts of the YLP program from the perspective of youth and CMs. Findings indicate that there are several levels of outcomes that relate to youth, CMs and community. These findings provide preliminary evidence of the program meeting short-term outcomes related to CM knowledge and skills, as well as longer-term goals related to enhanced community relationships and increased positive healthy behaviours in youth.

One of the major findings in this study was the identification of a pattern of incremental progression of engagement and skill development with both the youth and the CMs. For

example, within the findings regarding perceived youth impacts, regular participation and increased engagement was identified as an early indication of program impact on youth, and taking responsibility and a more active role in community development as life skills that developed later in the program. In addition, some of the CMs described their approach as incremental, where they provided the youth with opportunities to master straightforward skills before taking on more complex responsibilities.

The findings also identify several positive outcomes experienced by the CMs that follow a similar progression of development. Earlier skill development provided the CMs with opportunities to assume more complex roles, acquire increased responsibilities and in some cases, to advance within the organization, as well as within their own communities. These findings support other research in youth leadership that highlight varying and incremental levels of participant engagement (Halsall, Kendellen, Bean, & Forneris, 2016). In their research with residential camp counsellors, Halsall and colleagues (2016) results indicated that youth engagement in programming followed an ordered progression and that leader strategies needed to be tailored to fit each stage.

The identification of levels of engagement also aligns with Rose-Krasnor's (2009) framework that describes two levels of engagement factors as major components. These factors represent program elements that impact participant engagement; initiating factors are more influential for participants at the onset of program involvement and sustaining factors are involved later in the maintenance of program participation.

Perceived youth impacts provide preliminary evidence of the program achieving targeted outcomes, such as enhanced positive youth behaviours, CM knowledge and skills, and community relationships. This evidence is consistent with findings from past research on the

positive impact leadership programs can have on youth development (Bruce, Nicola & Menke, 2006; Catalano, et al., 2004; Hellison, et al., 2008). There is also research evidence that mentoring programs can be successfully applied to promote developmental outcomes for First Nations youth (Crooks, et al., 2010a) and that they may be most beneficial for at-risk youth (Bowers et al., 2014; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002).

The results also highlighted perceived impacts at the community level. This aligns with previous research identifying that youth leadership programs can enhance community engagement (Blum, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Furthermore, the findings relating to community partnerships varied greatly. Some communities had the advantage of generating lots of local interest from other programs, and developed formalized partnerships with other organizations. Other CMs were not able to utilize local programming infrastructure and relied on personal relationships and informal volunteering to build support for program activities. Although this is not stated within these findings, many CMs felt that overall, program implementation was less challenging for communities that were successful in developing partnerships with local organizations.

The results that identify perceived positive impacts for CMs may also represent a unique opportunity that is provided by leadership programs such as the YLP. Individual and contextual interactions could enhance the programming effects through secondary consequences for the youth. As the CMs demonstrate growth and career success as an achievable goal, they represent positive role models and demonstrate possible opportunities for youth participants. This may positively influence youth behavior over and above program impacts.

Findings related to CM and community impacts have important theoretical implications. Developmental systems theory proposes that healthy development can result from a mutually

positive interaction between an individual and their context (Agans, et al., 2014). Leadership programs that target community level factors may have an influence on both individual and context creating a better chance of mutually positive interaction and in turn, an increased likelihood for positive youth development. In support of this implication, previous research has identified that cultural continuity or community empowerment is associated with decreased incidence of youth suicide in First Nations communities (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Programs that target community impacts may be more influential with First Nations populations since these communities place an emphasis on communal values (Kirmayer, et al., 2009).

Based on the overall findings, this study provides evidence of positive experiences within youth leadership programming that incorporates youth voice. As a result youth leadership programming designed similarly to the YLP may be a valuable approach to foster youth development within First Nations communities. In addition, it is important to involve local community members as program leaders and incorporate community engagement strategies to help foster community development. Intergenerational community events and partnership strategies are viable ways to strengthen community ties both formally and informally.

This research highlights individual strengths and privileges community voice in the identification of perceived impacts of a leadership program for First Nations youth. It applies methods that are complementary to First Nations traditions such as the use of qualitative interviews to highlight stories related to program experiences. It also provides recommendations that are relevant for research and applied settings. The main limitation of this study is that it describes perceived impacts rather than objective measurement of outcomes. Furthermore, findings are based on a small sample size and as such, may provide a biased account of program experiences. Future evaluation designs should incorporate standardized outcome measures that

can substantiate program impacts. Measures that are developed using a non-Aboriginal population are often not well equipped for use in First Nations youth (Crooks et al., 2010a). However, adaptable tools that were developed within First Nations communities (for example see Young et al., 2013) may be useful options for examining program impacts. This study also would have benefitted from a more extended engagement with communities and youth, however since the researchers were positioned as external evaluators it was difficult to integrate in-depth, long-term interactions. Finally, this study is limited as it presented more data from the CM perspective than the youth perspective. Researchers working with First Nations youth in other studies have had difficulty capturing rich detail and description within interview and focus group data (Halsall & Forneris, in press; McHugh, Coppola, & Sinclair, 2013). This may be reflective of the fact that youth communication skills and comfort level are not at the same level as an adult. As such, we had much more content to draw on from the adult CM transcripts.

Further study is needed to identify if youth engagement and leadership development progress through similar stages within other program contexts. For example, research could examine programming with other populations and other contexts, such as school-based programs. It will also be important to design interventions that target their youth leadership development strategies using a progressive model and to examine their relative effectiveness. Strategies could be stratified based on identified participant engagement and these strategies could be evaluated to examine their impact. Policy should also be structured to fit to contextual needs regarding engagement. In communities where youth have yet to engage in minimum participation, program expectations should be established that correspond with early indicators of engagement. Future research is needed to further examine the nature and range of impacts that can be facilitated for community members, both as frontline service providers (like CMs) as well

as within other stakeholder roles related to the program. Interactions between individual and context should also be further examined. For example, community impacts could be explored as a potential mediator or moderator of youth impacts within leadership programs that target community-level outcomes. Furthermore, youth leadership has been identified as a key component of PYD programming (Hellison, et al., 2008; Lerner, et al., 2006; Zeldin & Camino, 1999), and as such, it may be useful to explore leadership as a mediator or moderator of program impacts.

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**CHAPTER IV**

**ARTICLE 3 – BEHIND THE SCENES OF YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY-  
EVENTS: A PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION APPROACH USING PHOTOVOICE IN  
A CANADIAN FIRST NATION COMMUNITY**

### **Abstract**

Challenges created by colonial policies have created a range of negative impacts on the health and well-being of First Nations youth. Research examining leadership programming for First Nations youth has begun to demonstrate positive impacts. Participatory evaluation aligns with the philosophy of leadership programming and has the potential to promote multiple benefits for the youth and community within First Nations context. The purpose of this research was to implement a participatory evaluation examining youth-led community events within a leadership program for First Nations youth. The data was collected using methods based on youth participatory evaluation principles and Photovoice practices including capacity building, stakeholder analysis, photo exploration and utilization-focused activities. A thematic analysis was used to examine the data and five themes were identified: (a) fun and fulfilling to engage the children, (b) positive outcomes for youth leaders, (c) community impacts, (d) challenges and (e) opportunities for improvement. This study applies a novel approach that combines Youth Participatory Evaluation and Photovoice to examine a youth leadership program for First Nations youth. The procedures and the results regarding program impacts and implementation issues are relevant for research and evaluation in programming for First Nations youth, as well other youth-led programs.

**Keywords:** Leadership; Youth engagement; Positive youth development; Program evaluation; Indigenous; Aboriginal.

## Introduction

Over the last decades, there has been an increased focus on the rights and freedoms of children and youth. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) highlights the particular needs of children and youth and states the importance of supporting their identity development, freedom of expression and the ability to express those views particularly in matters that affect them. It specifically emphasizes the importance of preserving the rights of indigenous children and youth to participate in their own culture, community, religion and language.

In Canada, most First Nations youth have been denied this right. Practices implemented by the Canadian government over the past century have been described as cultural genocide (see the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada ((TRC)a, 2015). These practices included the promotion of policies that involve the expropriation of land, division of families and the prohibition of cultural practices, including the use of traditional language and ceremony and are designed to promote “the destruction of those structures and practices that allow [a] group to continue as a group” (TRC, 2015a, p.1). These challenges have created a range of negative impacts on the health and well-being of First Nations youth (Crooks et al., 2010a; Kral, 2012, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996), including increased prevalence of mental health disorders (Baydala, et al., 2006; Elton-Marshall, Leatherdale & Burkhalter, 2011 Lemstra, et al., 2011) and suicide (Bratu, 2013; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

In developing interventions to improve health and well-being in First Nations youth, researchers have advocated for the application of strengths-based strategies that account for contextual challenges and focus on positive development (Crooks et al., 2010a) and empowerment (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer et al., 2003). Positive youth development (PYD) is an approach that conceptualizes youth development as being under the influence of

internal and external factors (Benson, 1997) and places a focus on positive outcomes and the life events that lead to future success (Roth et al., 1998). PYD programming focuses on skill-building (Roth et al., 1998) and targets the enhancement of a range of outcomes such as the promotion of resilience, competence, positive identity and prosocial involvement (Catalano et al., 2004). Youth leadership development has been identified as an integral component of effective PYD programs (Lerner et al., 2006; Zeldin & Camino, 1999).

Sport for Development is an approach that utilizes sport to promote developmental outcomes (Kidd, 2008) and this approach has been applied to promote positive youth development within First Nations communities (Bruner, et al., 2015). There is an expanding literature base highlighting the promising positive impacts of sport PYD programs (Bean & Forneris, 2013; Bruner et al., 2015; Hayhurst, Giles & Radforth, 2015; Ritchie, Wabano, Russell, Enosse, & Young, 2014). The Youth Leadership Program (YLP), a program that is implemented by Right to Play, is an example of programming that applies this approach. The YLP is the focus of the evaluation research presented here.

Leadership has been defined as “a relational process combining ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) with authority (voice, influence, and decision making power) to positively influence and impact diverse individuals, organizations, and communities” (MacNeil (2006), p.29). However, Hellison and colleagues (2009) differentiate *youth leadership* as having a central focus on helping others and is not limited to roles of influence; as such it is accessible to all youth and can be applied across contexts. With regards to youth leadership programming, Zeldin and Camino (1999) proposed that such programming should be comprised of the following three elements: “First and foremost, it is grounded in a social cause. Second, it seeks to promote a relatively narrow set of youth outcomes, specifically those that allow young people to

engage in collaborative action. And third, programming incorporates not only instruction and action, but equally important, membership and modelling” (p. 10). Researchers have identified that there is a contrast between traditional definitions of leadership and First Nations perceptions of leadership (Jules, 1988; Julien et al., 2010). The First Nations concept of leadership highlights the importance of connection to the people, humility and service (Jules, 1988) as well as the use of collectivist and participatory strategies (Redpath & Nielsen, 1997). Researchers suggest that modern youth are in need of more opportunities that provide incremental preparation for the responsibilities of emerging adulthood (Benson, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000). Leadership programs may provide the opportunity to help bridge this gap. In his early work regarding the promotion of youth leadership, Hart (1997) describes the levels of youth-adult partnership development within his ladder of participation. His levels range from a baseline that describes an adult-led, manipulative format and ranges through to a fully participatory model that is initiated by youth.

There are few studies that examine strengths-based or leadership programming with First Nations youth and their impacts. Crooks et al. (2015) conducted a case study of the Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations initiatives that described a range of programs designed to enhance cultural connectedness, academic success and the development of healthy relationships in First Nations youth. They found that the initiatives had a positive impact on participants’ relationships, sense of belonging, academic success, confidence and leadership. Specific leadership programming with First Nations youth has demonstrated promising impacts, such as improved school performance (Crooks et al., 2010b) and increased resilience (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Research and evaluation that applies a traditional methodological approach has promoted colonial hierarchies and exclusion, and has had detrimental impacts on First Nations

communities (Absolon & Willett, 2004; LaFrance & Nichols, 2010). As a result, many First Nations people are apprehensive of researchers and reluctant to participate (Blodgett et al., 2011; Bennett, 2004; Boffa et al., 2011; Lafrance, 2010; Smith, 2012). As such, it is useful to apply participatory strategies to enhance meaningful involvement and to promote community benefits.

Youth participatory evaluation (YPE) evolved from both the PYD approach and from participatory evaluation (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Flores, 2008) and has been described as, "an approach in which young people are active participants in the stages of knowledge development, including defining the problem, gathering the information, and using the results" (Checkoway, & Richards-Schuster, 2003, p. 22). Crooks and colleagues (2010a) suggested that YPE with First Nations youth creates the following benefits: enhanced ethical considerations of the research project, increased validity of data, increased relevance to community members, and the development of youth skills and interest.

Photovoice is another participatory approach whereby photos are used to empower participants to share their own perspective and to begin a dialogue from that outlook in order to later inform decision making (Wang & Burris, 1997). In part, photos facilitate data generation because they stimulate participant interpretation and meaning making (Harrison, 2002). Photovoice and photography-based research methods have been implemented successfully with First Nations youth and many examples of this approach exist within the literature (e.g. Jardine & James, 2012; McHugh et al., 2013; Pearce & Coholic, 2013; Young et al., 2013). Researchers have suggested that it is important to modify Photovoice in order to be adaptable to First Nations community needs and objectives (Castleden 2008). Modified Photovoice projects have been applied with First Nations youth, whereby methods were adjusted to better meet youth's goals and capture their experience (see McHugh et al., 2013; Pearce & Coholic, 2013; Young et al.,

2013). McHugh and colleagues (2013) implemented an adapted Photovoice method to explore the meanings First Nations youth attribute to sport. The project was developed as a response to community and youth interest. They initiated the photo assignment during a sports event and then held Talking Circles, an indigenous method of sharing stories similar to focus groups. Within the talking circles, participants 1) shared photographs that illustrated the meaning of sport to them, 2) described the photos and explained why they chose them, 3) discussed the meaning of sport and 4) discussed the sports they participated in and that they hoped to become involved with.

Researchers have suggested that there is a need to further examine context and implementation within PYD programming (Catalano et al., 2004; Larson, 2006; Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Zarrett et al., 2009) in order to identify mechanisms that promote PYD (Hodge, Danish & Martin, 2012; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015). Within the sport for development literature, there is a general lack of program evaluation (Levermore, 2011), and researchers have called for more evaluation research that explores context (Levermore, 2011), examines underlying processes that effect change (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011) and that honour local knowledge (Kay, 2009; Whitley, Hayden & Gould, 2015). Finally, there is a need for more evaluation of sport PYD programs that are being implemented in Canada (Hayhurst & Giles, 2013) and that examine impacts on First Nations community self-determination (Hayhurst et al., 2015).

Recognizing the potential contribution PYD programs can make within First Nations communities, as well as the possible relationship between leadership and positive youth outcomes, it is important to further explore these interventions. The purpose of this research was to contribute to the evidence on programming with First Nations youth by describing a YPE of

the Youth Leadership Program (YLP), a program that was designed to promote First Nations youth leadership and community development. The study presented in this paper was a part of a larger research project evaluating the preliminary outcomes and implementation of the YLP (Halsall & Forneris, 2016; Halsall & Forneris, in press) and focuses on a more in-depth examination of the youth-led community events within one participating community.

Researchers working with First Nations communities assert that it is important to apply methodologies that incorporate youth voice and maximize community benefits (Jardine & James, 2012; LaFrance & Nichols, 2010; McHugh et al., 2013; Pearce & Coholic, 2013; Young et al., 2013). As such, this study applied a participatory approach that incorporates methods from YPE and Photovoice to examine a leadership program designed to promote the development of First Nations youth. Specifically, we describe the methodology used to evaluate youth-led community events within the program and present youth leaders and staff perceptions related to the event.

## **Background**

The program of focus in this study is the Youth Leadership Program, which was developed and implemented by Right to Play. The overall mission of Right to Play is to help marginalized children to overcome challenges through learning and empowerment within play-based activities (Right to Play, 2016). The YLP is a component of the larger Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth program, which has been implemented within Ontario since 2010, and has since expanded to 88 separate communities across Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia.

The YLP runs throughout the school year (September to June) and applies an experiential learning model to promote youth leadership skills and community development. It is based on several components that include mentorship, weekly programming and the development of community events. Mentors for the program are community members who typically share the

same cultural background as the youth. Hereafter the mentors are referred to as Community Mentors. Overall, the program philosophy is based on the inclusion of youth voice. This involves the inclusion of youth vision and agency in directing the program. Throughout the program, opportunities are provided for the youth to engage in decision making and to take responsibility for program activities. This study was undertaken in one sub-urban reserve located in southern Ontario that was implementing the YLP program. In this community, the YLP program took place at the local community centre. The program typically ran for two to three hours, twice a week.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Eleven youth (4 males, 7 females) ranging in age from 12-18 years participated in this study. In the remainder of the paper, we will refer to the participants as ‘youth leaders’. These are the youth who regularly attend the after-school program and who were responsible for organizing and coordinating the events. The researchers initially connected with community members and staff at Community Mentor Trainings as well as a Youth Symposium for the larger YLP program to identify communities that would be interested in participating in a more in-depth participatory evaluation of the YLP activities. As such, a purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) strategy was applied in order to connect with youth in a representative community. However, after experiencing some difficulties in the recruitment process an influential community member and Director at Right to Play helped facilitate contact between the researchers and the identified community to build a productive research relationship. The community involved in this project was selected because the Community Mentor had been very

successful in generating interest and momentum in the program and was interested in being involved in a more in-depth participatory evaluation.

This study was a part of a larger research project that involved a partnership between the University of Ottawa and Right to Play. For this study, a Research Advisory Committee was created to guide the project and involved leadership from Elders, external indigenous researchers and Right to Play staff. This study received approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board. The Research Advisory Committee created four ethical principles for this research that were guided by the concepts of relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation, rights and regulations. The committee met with the research team on several occasions and provided feedback and guidance regarding the design and methods used within the research.

### **Procedure**

Participatory research has been identified as an effective method for working with indigenous communities (Smith, 2012). This research applies an approach that draws from two participatory methods, including YPE (Flores, 2008; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Zeldin et al., 2012) and a modified version of Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). These methods were implemented over three program sessions to collect the data for this study. However, it should be noted that the researchers were involved with the YLP program over the course of three and a half years and therefore had a very good understanding of the program.

### **Choosing the focus and approach**

The first workshop included an introduction to program evaluation and participatory evaluation for the youth, including a description of Photovoice. This workshop took place during regular programming time in the community recreation centre. More specifically, the workshop

included energizers and an activity adapted from Flores (2008) called reflection on a word (p.52, see results provided in Table 1). This activity was used to facilitate a discussion about the meaning of participatory evaluation. At the end of the workshop, the youth leaders decided on evaluation objectives and methods. They chose the focus of the evaluation from among three possible options that included: 1) exploring participant experiences during a community event, 2) examining leadership experiences throughout the program or 3) conducting a needs assessment. The youth leaders decided to conduct a Photovoice exploration of their upcoming Easter community event.

**Table 1:** Selected Youth Leader Feedback from the Participatory Evaluation Activity

Participation	Evaluation	Participatory Evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joining all the games</li> <li>• Getting involved</li> <li>• Not sitting out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skill level</li> <li>• Questionnaires</li> <li>• Tests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helping and testing</li> <li>• Seeing how well you participate</li> <li>• School</li> </ul>

### **Implementing the Photovoice exploration**

The second workshop included a brief introduction to photography techniques, guidelines on how to capture photos safely (including an exploration of ethics and privacy issues) and a discussion about informed consent in preparation for the focus groups. The workshop began with a stakeholder analysis activity adapted from Flores (2008) called the reality wheel (p.76, see results provided in Table 2). This allowed the youth leaders to reflect on the overall program goals and to explore stakeholder involvement. From this activity, they developed a list of

relevant stakeholders that was used within a later discussion of how to best communicate evaluation findings.

**Table 2:** Youth Leader Feedback Regarding YLP Stakeholders from the Reality Wheel

Activity

Right to Play Program Stakeholders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program participants [the youth leaders]</li> <li>• Frontline staff</li> <li>• Parents</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Community partners</li> <li>• Chief and Council</li> <li>• Younger children</li> <li>• Families</li> <li>• The partnering university</li> <li>• Local schools</li> </ul>

The following week, the youth leaders coordinated their Easter community event and collected photos to capture their experience of the event, as well as the successes and challenges they experienced. The event was completely facilitated by the youth leaders and involved an Easter egg hunt, children's activities and a pancake breakfast. The third and last workshop was held a week later and involved photo exploration activities, focus groups and a knowledge

exchange activity to discuss the utilization of findings. Many of the youth leaders brought back photos that included their own descriptions of the photo content and the meaning this had for them. Since the Photovoice activity was being run during regular programming, it needed to be adapted to include those who were unable to participate in the Easter event. As such, the youth leaders were asked to describe experiences related to either the Easter event, or another community event that they had facilitated. A game was designed in order to make the photo sharing more interactive and engaging. Three stations were created that included a flip-chart and one of three questions and prompts: 1) Describe what happened at the community event (Who participated? What were the activities? Unexpected events? Interesting stories?), 2) Describe a success or a challenge from the community event (What went well during the event? What did not go as well?) and 3) How can we make the next event even better? (Suggestions for marketing, event planning, coordinating). The youth leaders were split into three teams and each assigned to one station. The teams were instructed to respond to each question by posting photos and descriptions at each station. The teams had five minutes to post as many responses as possible and then they had to switch stations. Each team used a unique colour of post-it's at each station. One point was awarded for each unique description (or each post-it) and teams were allowed to steal points from other teams by posting new descriptions at each station.

After the game, the youth leaders participated in focus groups, one that discussed the Easter event, and the other that discussed community events in general. The concept of informed consent was reviewed and consent forms were collected. Focus group questions explored general event experiences (e.g. What did the participants think of the event?) and participation (e.g. Who normally attends these events? Who else should come out that isn't coming yet?), positive event outcomes (e.g. How does the community benefit from the event? Why are these events

important? What did you learn?) and possible ways to improve the events (e.g. How can we get more people involved? What skills would you like to develop during future community events?). Responses were audio-recorded and summarized on flipcharts during the discussions.

### **Examining ways to disseminate the findings**

The workshop ended with a knowledge exchange activity. During the activity, the group reviewed the list of stakeholders developed from the reality wheel activity and the focus group feedback summaries. Based on this content, they generated ideas regarding what kind of message they wanted to share and options for targeted methods of communication, such as flyers, local radio and social media. An interview was conducted with the Community Mentor to obtain his perspective of the community event. Community Mentor interview questions explored more general information about the program, such as design for youth involvement (How do you get youth involved in leading the program?), implementation issues (Did you experience any difficulties implementing the program? Please describe.) and underlying mechanisms (What part of the program do you feel made the biggest impact? Why?).

An early thematic analysis was initiated by the youth leaders through their interpretation of the meaning of their photos and the categorization of their feedback during the photo sharing game. These themes were then used to organize the remainder of the data from the interviews. Feedback was received from the Community Mentor regarding the accuracy of the results. To maintain the integrity of the youth voice and their experiences we have presented the photos along with all of the youth leaders' original text while integrating quotes from the transcripts and post-it notes that help support the overall themes generated.

## **Authenticity**

This research meets several criteria of quality, both through methodological approach and contribution. In relation to Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, this study exemplifies her concept of ethics, worthy topic and significant contribution. With regard to ethics, the methodological approach applied participatory strategies that were adapted to engage youth in the implementation of the research as well as in choosing the direction of the study goals. Participatory approaches have been identified as essential for fostering ethical considerations and maximizing participant and community benefits (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010; Smith, 2012). In light of the colonial impacts that affect First Nations youth and the severity of the issues this has created the subject of this research is addressing a worthy topic. This research makes significant contributions both to the literature and to the community context. In contribution to the literature, it outlines a novel approach to getting First Nations youth involved in evaluation. This research contributes to the community context by providing practical program recommendations for a targeted audience. This element of the study is of particular importance as LaFrance and colleagues (2012) suggest that the validity of evaluation in indigenous communities be measured in terms of community contribution.

## **Results**

Overall, the findings indicate that the youth-led community event provided an important and meaningful experience for all involved. The findings are organized into the themes that arose from the analysis of the photo exploration activities, focus groups and interview with the Community Mentor which include, (a) fun and fulfilling to engage the children, (b) positive outcomes for youth leaders, (c) community impacts, (d) challenges and (e) opportunities for

improvement. In Table 3, we provide some of the post-it note feedback shared during the photo sharing game.

**Table 3:** Selected Youth Leader Feedback from the Event Exploration Game

Experiences	Successes	Challenges	Opportunities for improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kids were smiling left and right</li> <li>• Community members come out and enjoy the festivities and food</li> <li>• We all come together</li> <li>• People helping with the pancakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everybody enjoyed the events hosted by RTP</li> <li>• Good advertising</li> <li>• The egg hunt was excellent</li> <li>• Different gen[erations]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behind on pancakes</li> <li>• Bunny getting attacked by children</li> <li>• Some youth didn't come so it was harder to run</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure everyone isn't busy the day of the event</li> <li>• Involve more people outside the community</li> <li>• Plan events that all ages will enjoy</li> </ul>

### **Fun and Fulfilling to Engage the Children**

Many of the youth's photos focused on the children's activities and captured positive experiences from the Easter event. One of the youth leaders attended the event as the Easter Bunny and this appeared to be a highlight for the children (Photo A1). For example, some of the youth leaders described the excitement that centred around the Easter bunny and the commotion

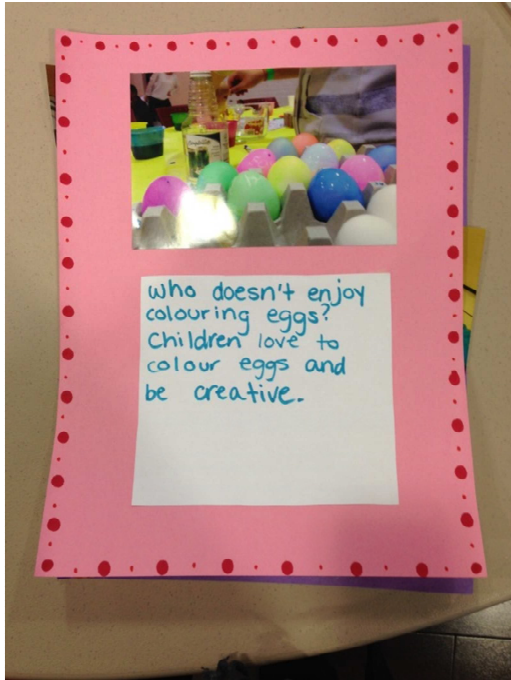
it created, “They got to run around!”, “Scream and chase each other”, “Bunch of kids running around, attacking the bunny tails, almost knocked down the Easter bunny.”

There were several other activities planned for the children, including an Easter egg hunt, colouring eggs, a colouring contest, basket making and a bonnet parade (Photo A2). The youth leaders facilitated the children’s activities and later served a pancake breakfast for everyone who attended. In the photo she took, one of the youth leaders wrote a description of the event from the children’s perspective and how they would remember this as a positive experience. She wrote the following text (Photo A3):

The exciting day of egg hunting soon began to die down as eager kids went inside, starving for the wonderful pancakes made by the locals. Soon all the kids were digging into delicious food, chatting with each other of the loot and candy they’ve collected. Creating great memories.

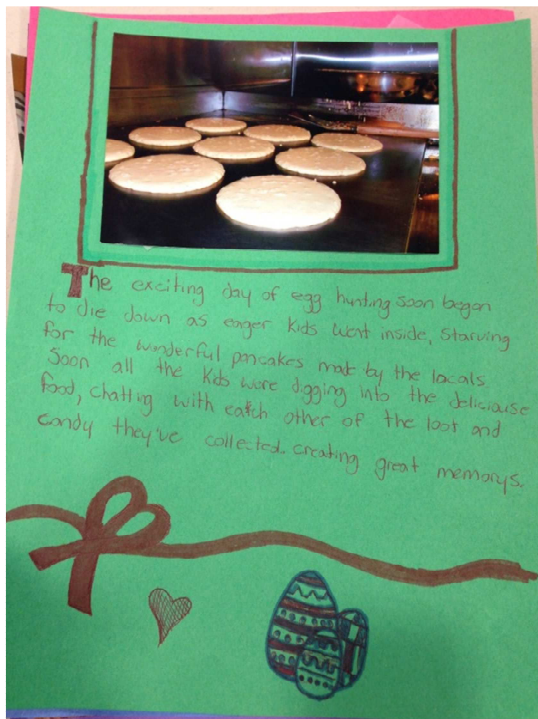


**Photo A1:** Meeting the Easter Bunny



who doesn't enjoy  
colouring eggs?  
Children love to  
colour eggs and  
be creative.

**Photo A2: Colouring Eggs**



The exciting day of egg hunting soon began  
to die down as eager kids went inside, starving  
for the wonderful pancakes made by the locals.  
Soon all the kids were digging into the delicious  
food, chatting with each other of the loot and  
candy they've collected, creating great memories.

**Photo A3: Pancake Breakfast**

### **Positive Outcomes for the Youth Leaders**

The youth leaders were involved in all the stages of event planning and it was evident that they gained responsibility and leadership skills. In planning the event the youth leaders took responsibility for budgeting, setting up the event, cooking and serving all of the food, facilitating specific activities, cleaning up after the event was over and evaluating the event. Some of the youth leaders described the tasks that were involved with organizing a community event: “We’re basically responsible for getting everything organized before the event”, “Yeah, like set up and decorating”, “And then who’s doing what at the day of the event”. As a result of their experience during community events, many of the youth leaders developed increased confidence for providing customer service, coordinating activities and public performance. One youth leader spoke about being the Easter bunny and engaging the younger kids in the community. In her role, she took responsibility for facilitating the activities for the younger children and providing entertainment during the community event, “I volunteered to be the bunny and ... I basically had to, I was in a suit, just prancing around, saying hi to all the kids, hugging kids, doing little dances and stuff. That’s basically what I had to do...” Another youth leader captured this experience in Photo A4.

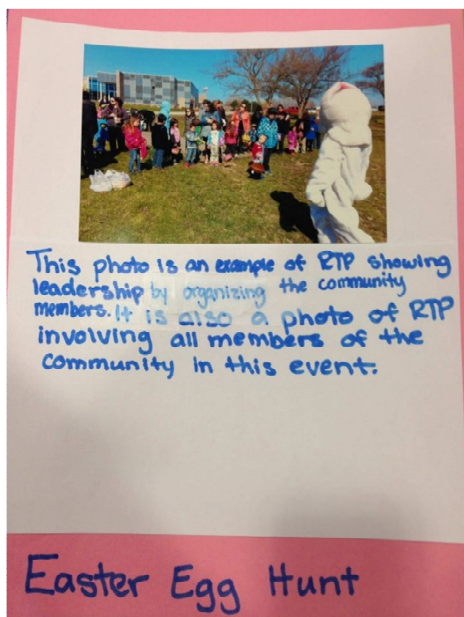
Another youth spoke about the responsibility of being behind the desk in another community event the youth leaders had organized and implemented at Halloween. The youth leader described how he/she managed the money and other youth performed for the guests during their haunted house event, “During the haunted house, if you were behind the desk, you were in charge of keeping everybody’s money and seeing what level they wanted of scary. For example, level 5 was an excessive chainsaw act.”

Another youth leader described how they were involved in many events each year and was responsible for multiple tasks. He felt that this helped him to develop the ability to take on more components of the program events independently and to take more of a leadership role:

Yeah, we could [run the events]. Because of the fact that we've done multiple events, and we've seen what happens. If we do less advertisement and less organization, what happens. And the fact that we did the Easter egg hunt and it came together, like perfect. I think we'd be able to.

The Community Mentor described the significant role the youth leaders played during the events. He described how they coordinated all the community members and facilitated the children's activities:

They were a big part of controlling the crowd and who's going to go first and the craft tables, that couldn't have went any better. They sit down with any of the youth that came and helped them along, what they were supposed to do.



**Photo A4:** Easter Egg Hunt

## Community Impacts

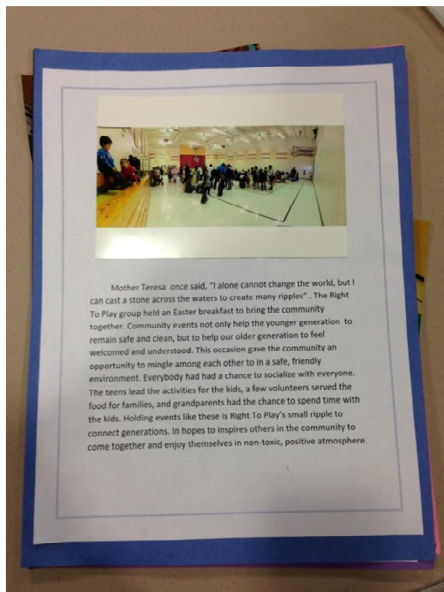
The participants estimated the attendance of the Easter event at approximately 300. The Community Mentor was discussing the success of the event and shared the numbers of community members that participated: “It was about 300. There were 160 kids, and that was just the ones that signed up. And then there was all the parents and grandparents there too, so there was a lot of people. All the tables were stacked.”

Some of the youth leaders took photos to illustrate some of the benefits of the event to the community (Photo A5). One of the youth leaders talked about how through the events that they, the youth leaders, were able to create and offer many levels of involvement and provide different benefits for a range of community members, including young children, youth and Elders. She provided the following description with her photo (Photo A6):

Mother Theresa once said, "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples". The Right to Play group [the youth leaders] held an Easter breakfast to bring the community together. Community events not only help the younger generation to remain safe and clean, but to help our older generation to feel welcomed and understood. This occasion gave the community an opportunity to mingle among each other in a safe, friendly environment. Everybody had a chance to socialize with everyone. The teens lead the activities for the kids, a few volunteers serve the food for families, and grandparents had the chance to spend time with the kids. Holding events like these is Right to Play's [the youth leader's] small ripple to connect generations. In hopes to inspire others in the community to come together and enjoy themselves in non-toxic, positive atmosphere.



**Photo A5:** Community shot



**Photo A6:** Community impact

## Challenges

Although the Easter event was very well attended, an on-going challenge identified by the youth leaders was how to increase participation, both in their regular group meetings and at their larger events. The youth leaders talked about how they were often successful in generating attendance from the young children at the events, but that there were harder to reach

demographics, such as the older teens and young adults, “The little kids come back all the time.” “You always see the same people at all the events.” “Five to eight year-olds are always coming.”

The Community Mentor described the difficulties they have in reaching the older adolescent and emerging adult population. He speculated that they might not be attending regular programming as it is not socially desirable, or because they do not see any personal gain:

I would say the 19 to 30 that’s really tough to bring those guys out. I don’t know, they just don’t see programming as why they would come out. They’re still in the too cool thing, you know what I mean, too cool to, they don’t come out unless they’re really personally invited and there’s something they’re going to get out of it.

The participants felt that those older youth that do come to the events, come because they had their own children who were interested in participating. They acknowledged that young children attended the Easter event, and some older youth came with their own children: “Really younger kids and then older kids... With their kids.” The Community Mentor also felt they were only able to access some of the older youth because they had children of their own: “We’ve just got to kind of capture them because those are the guys that are kind of being left out of the program. [The youth that do come are] parents, you know... they’re just young parents.”

Many of the youth leaders expressed that racism was a barrier to getting more people involved in the events from outside of the reserve. They talked about how some people perceived the reserve to be a dangerous place: “Who’s going to come to the rez?” “People are going to be like scared.” “People are actually scared to come here.” “I don’t know why.” “Yeah, I don’t get it.”

The youth leaders talked about how their friends were also afraid to come to the reserve and this kept them from attending youth program nights and events: “None of my friends will

come out anyway.” “So, how come they’re not coming out?” “Because my friends don’t like coming to the reserve because they’re scared, I guess.”

One of the youth leaders suggested that these people who were afraid to come to the reserve held stereotypical perceptions of the community members who lived there: “Just stereotypical people, because we’re native and I guess we’re scary.”

### **Opportunities for Improvement**

In terms of making changes to improve future events, the youth leaders came up with many different ideas. Many of their ideas focused on ways to increase participation, both in terms of total numbers, as well as engaging a larger diversity of age groups. Some of their previous strategies had worked well for them and would continue to be implemented, such as partnering with other organizations to enhance events, including local celebrities and using social media to market the events. They considered some new strategies, such as using local radio stations and posting flyers around the school. Some of their ideas for advertising were more ambitious. The following is a suggestion made by one of the youth leaders that describes sharing positive messages about the program through television advertisement:

Posters aren’t enough, we need people extreme. Extreme meaning on television, getting people to air our advertisements... That would attract a lot of people, because they say good things about our program, then they’ll think about our event and go, ‘oh that must be really good’, so they’ll come out.

They talked about creating targeted events that would be more interesting for people of the older generation. The youth leaders suggested organizing Bingo to attract the Elders: “We should run it for older people.” “Make it age appropriate.” “A senior bingo.”

## Discussion

This study applied YPE and Photovoice methods in order to evaluate youth-led community events within a leadership program for First Nations youth. The findings highlight youth experiences related to community events, including: the enjoyment of engaging children from the community, positive impacts for youth leaders and the community, as well as implementation challenges and opportunities for improvement.

The participants felt it was easier to engage younger children and that involving them was a good strategy to bring in families, including parents, grandparents and other family members. Other researchers have highlighted the significance of children within First Nations communities and the influence they have on the rest of the community (Ball, 2005). In their examination of early childhood programming, Ball (2005) argued that children's programs should be prioritized within First Nations community contexts: "In many First Nations, the reason is simply and frequently stated: Children are our future" (p. 39). This aligns with First Nations cultural values that take a long-term perspective on impact as in the teaching of the Seven Generations: "What we do today impacts the next seven generations to come" (Lavallée, 2010, p. 273).

The findings indicated that the youth participants experienced many positive outcomes as a result of their participation, such as the development of practical skills and leadership capacity. Youth shared stories about experiencing increased engagement, confidence and life skills as a result of their participation. These results are consistent with another study involving youth from other communities participating in the YLP program (Halsall & Forneris, 2016) that demonstrated that youth from several other communities perceived positive impacts related to confidence and life skills development. In other research, leadership programs have been

effective at enhancing development for First Nations youth (Crooks et al., 2010b; Ritchie et al., 2014).

Our findings highlight the youth leaders' positive perspectives regarding growth and development. Other research applying Photovoice methods with First Nations youth describe similar findings wherein youth participants' maintained optimistic perspectives. In a project examining smoking behaviour in schools, a youth researcher working with Jardine and James (2012) suggested that they frame their findings in a more optimistic way by presenting healthy behaviours alongside findings about risky behaviours. This helped to shift the tone of their findings to a more positive perspective. In other research exploring the lived experiences of First Nations girls, findings demonstrated that participants were able to overcome challenges by recognizing their personal strengths and by relying on traditional teaching and cultural activities (Pearce & Coholic, 2013).

The YLP program is specifically designed to create positive impacts within the community and the results highlighted perceived community impacts from the youth-led event. Furthermore, the Easter event was estimated to have attracted 300 participants, which reflects a substantial turn-out considering that, based on government data, the estimated population on this reserve is just over 900. Findings from evaluations with other First Nations communities implementing the YLP (Halsall & Forneris, in press) indicated that community events create a greater sense of community and serve to strengthen partnerships, both formal and informal. Researchers have argued that civic contribution emerges as a result of healthy youth development and that this serves to perpetuate a mutual adaptive interaction between youth and their environment (Lerner et al., 2005). This has been substantiated in First Nations communities where researchers identified a relationship between increased community empowerment and

decreased rates of youth suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Since this program is designed to enhance both youth and community development, it may have a stronger influence on both youth and community targets as a result of reciprocal interactions (Halsall & Forneris, 2016). The findings for this study may provide preliminary evidence of this relationship as the results highlight both youth civic engagement as well as community engagement.

The main challenges discussed by the participants were related to difficulties engaging older youth as well as barriers related to racism. The results indicated that participants felt it was difficult to engage older youth in the program. Previous research has found that it can be difficult to engage older First Nations youth (Anonson et al., 2008; Thiessen, 2009). The participants indicated that many of the youth who did participate, came because they had children who might benefit from the programming. Although being a young parent was an incentive for youth to get involved in the community events, having young children might make it difficult for them to participate in weekly program activities since they would have to find childcare in order to attend. In 2006, Statistics Canada identified that 8% of First Nations adolescent girls were parents in comparison with 1.3% for their mainstream peers and that 18% of First Nations women over the age of 14 were single parents (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). Other research has identified that childcare can be a barrier for young First Nations women to participate in programming (Hayhurst & Giles, 2015). To alleviate this issue, the provision of childcare programs may facilitate on-going participation from young First Nations parents.

The perceived barrier to attendance related to racism was primarily due to challenges in having people from outside the reservation come to the event. Similar to our findings, other researchers have identified that racism is a long-standing issue that affects First Nations youth and communities (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Battiste, 2002; Baskin, 2007; Palmer & Cooke, 1996;

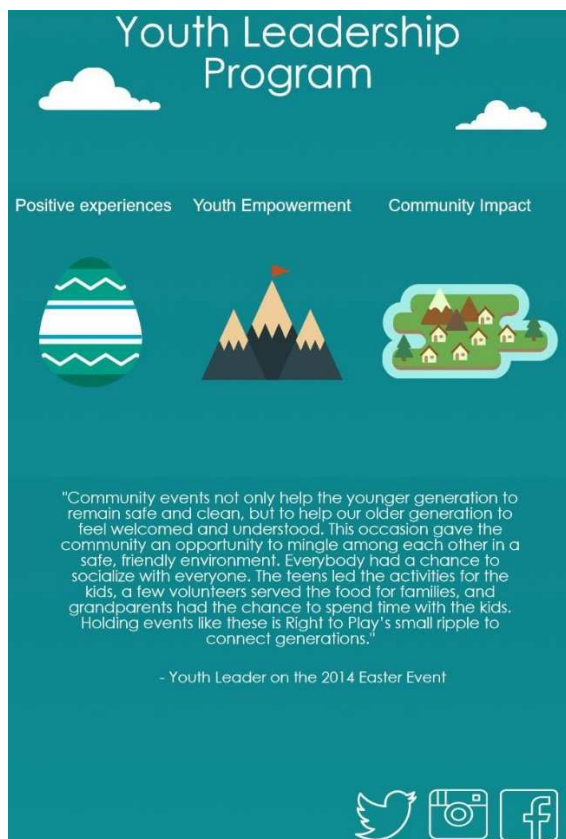
TRC, 2015b). More research is needed to examine how First Nations youth who are involved in community initiatives can decrease the barrier of racism to enhance or increase participation of individuals from outside of the community.

Regarding opportunities for improvement, the youth leaders talked about specifically involving Elders in future events by organizing events that would be most interesting to this age group. In our research with other communities, forums that increased exposure between the older and younger generations created the opportunity for the older community members to witness the contributions that the youth were making and resulted in positive community impacts (Halsall & Forneris, 2016).

Another opportunity for improvement that was identified by the youth was the use of strategies to improve event promotion. The youth leaders' suggestion to utilize social media as a communication tool is supported by research. Norman and Yip (2012) argue that social media represents an innovative forum for health promotion with youth as it facilitates access to information and provides a forum for youth to share their experiences. Neiger and colleagues (2012) argue that there are five main applications for social media in health promotion, including: (a) communication with the target audience; (b) establishing and promoting a brand (c) sharing information (d) broadening influence and (e) promoting engagement. As such, many of their desired goals, including increasing participation in community events and broadening their reach can be achieved using this strategy. Other First Nations youth programming has successfully used social media to promote social support between participants (Hayhurst & Giles, 2015).

## Sharing the Findings

In collaboration with the Community Mentor and using the information from the knowledge exchange activity described above, a follow-up workshop was designed to share results, collect youth leader feedback and discuss possible marketing strategies that could be used to share the findings and promote the program (see Figure 1). During this event, the youth created posters that described their experiences in the program and the lead author filmed the youth as they described their experiences. The footage was used to develop a promotional video for the youth. This product will be used in a presentation to the community Band and Council that is planned for autumn 2016. It will also be disseminated through other media such as the group's Facebook page and Youtube.



**Figure 1:** Infographic (modified for anonymity) developed for the knowledge exchange workshop.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

This research is novel because the YLP program places a specific emphasis on community development and this study highlights these impacts. The main strength demonstrated by this study is that it applied a novel combination of Photovoice and youth participatory evaluation practices to collaborate with First Nations youth. This approach was a good fit with the YLP philosophy and it was easily adapted to fit the community and youth needs. Researchers have argued that this approach is critical for making research initiatives accessible and interesting for youth and for facilitating youth contribution to the direction of projects (Flores, 2008; Young et al., 2013). Jardine and James (2012) argue that their participatory project facilitated engagement of youth participants and helped them experience a sense of ownership for the process and impacts of the research. They also identified that the youth developed leadership and research capacity as a result of being involved in the research and that youth involvement can enhance the impact of the research findings as it can enhance the relevance and strength of the message for the community audience (Jardine & James, 2012). The study presented in this paper applied several youth-led strategies, including stakeholder analysis, knowledge exchange activities and methods of dissemination to ensure that the findings were utilized in a beneficial manner (see Patton, 2008). Furthermore, LaFrance and colleagues (2012) put forth the argument that the value of an evaluation within indigenous communities should be based on its impact and contribution.

Although the methods used in this study exhibit several strengths, there were also some limitations. This study was accomplished over a very limited time frame. Time constraints are common issue that has been documented in other Photovoice studies with First Nations youth (Jardine & James, 2012; McHugh et al., 2013). In our case, the short time frame was the result of

the availability of open programming time. As such, it was not possible to implement this evaluation over a longer period of time which could have created more opportunity for relationship building. Additionally, the focus group data with the youth leaders largely yielded brief answers that did not always provide a lot of context or description. This is consistent with the findings of McHugh and colleagues (2013). In our case, this may have been related to the youth leaders' communication style. When one youth leader would provide an answer, the others would build on it, which did not allow a lot of space to elaborate on varieties of descriptions and experiences. Finally, beyond the analysis that was incorporated in the photo sharing activity, the youth were not involved more in-depth in that stage, although the Community Mentor did provide feedback about the themes. This issue has been reported in other research with First Nations youth (McHugh et al., 2013; Hayhurst & Giles, 2015). Since the sample for this study was drawn from a community that was deemed to have a more successful program in operation than other communities, the findings may not be reflective of the experiences within other communities implementing the YLP. Finally, because the pace of this research lagged behind program operations, some of the findings were no longer applicable when they were presented back to the community. For example, one of the challenges that was identified at the time of the study was increasing participation of older youth; however, when the findings were presented during the knowledge exchange workshop, many of the younger participants had taken on the ranks of the older youth and the program was then looking to draw in younger participants again. In the future, it would be useful to present quick practical recommendations that are based directly on youth perceptions shortly after data collection is completed. This can be followed by a more comprehensive report that discusses the implications of these findings that are based on related literature.

## **Implications for Research and Practice**

This study was useful for the youth leaders and community members who were involved as it generated results about positive experiences that could be used to promote and strengthen the YLP in the current community or in one of the other 87 communities currently involved in the larger PLAY program. The findings are also relevant for other communities developing or implementing leadership programs for First Nations youth. This study took place in a community that had been operating for several years and that had been identified as being very successful. As such, the findings could be used to support learning in communities that are in an early stage of program implementation, or for programs that encounter similar challenges. Furthermore, the findings regarding perceived positive impacts could be shared broadly to generate more stakeholder interest both within and outside of the communities and to enhance participation in the YLP or other youth leadership programs. Finally, programs looking to implement a participatory evaluation approach can apply the strategies described in this study to better engage youth in the process and to enhance the relevance of their findings.

Researchers and service providers argue that Positive Youth Development programs, such as the Youth Leadership Program, have the potential to target problematic behaviours as well as to promote health (Catalano et al., 2002). Health promotion can be fostered as these approaches are holistic, strengths-based and take individual and environmental factors into account (Benson, 1997; Lerner, et al., 2006; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray & Foster, 1998). Since many First Nations youth are exposed to increased levels of health and development risk factors, it is important to utilize a positive approach that emphasizes contextual influences and individual potential. Enhancing these programs by incorporating strategies that promote individual

leadership and community contribution create opportunities to maximize health promotion outcomes.

Future research directions should involve projects that are based on more in-depth and longer term involvement with the community. Although youth should be consulted on the accuracy of the themes formed regardless of research skills, as youth researcher's capacity develops within participatory projects, they can become more involved in complex responsibilities and take further ownership of the research direction. Benefits can be amplified when the research is more closely embedded in existing community climate and as a result, can be aligned with current needs and goals. Leadership programming should continue to incorporate novel participatory evaluation strategies that promote youth engagement and creativity. Future research should seek to explore the inter-relationships between community empowerment, youth empowerment and youth development more in-depth within the First Nations community context. Such examinations could make contributions to developmental systems theory and to the expanding literature on youth leadership and the sovereignty of First Nations communities.

### **Conclusion**

This study combined Youth Participatory Evaluation and Photovoice practices to implement an evaluation of youth-led community events within a program designed to promote leadership for First Nations youth. The results highlight perceived positive impacts for children, youth and community, as well as challenges and opportunities for improvement. This research describes a novel approach to youth-led evaluation that incorporates research-based and innovative strategies to engage youth in the research. Findings can be applied to other research settings including the evaluation of youth programming in First Nations context, as well other youth-led program evaluation. As youth capacity and individual rights continue to be a point of

current debate, the insights gained from this process help to provide evidence of youth potential for independence, leadership and community contribution.

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**CHAPTER V**  
**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

## General Discussion

The overall purpose of this research was to examine the YLP program to gain an understanding of program implementation and perceived outcomes related to both individual and community development. Two studies were conducted to fulfil the research purpose. The general discussion is divided into three sections. The first section summarizes the main findings from the research and provides recommendations based on those findings. The second section discusses the limitations of the research related to the overall methodology. Finally, the third section offers specific program recommendations that are relevant to Right to Play.

Chapter II (Article 1, hereafter) and Chapter III (Article 2, hereafter) described qualitative exploratory evaluations of the program across communities. Article 1 placed a focus on examining implementation issues from a frontline service provider perspective (CMs). This perspective was unique and important for understanding the functioning of the program as these individuals were involved in the day to day operations, they were closely connected to the youth and they were also community members and could bring an Indigenous worldview to their consideration of program issues. It was also useful to examine implementation issues in order to apply the findings to establish better program operations and to improve program effects. The findings were divided into the main categories of programming successes and challenges and the following themes were identified: (a) designing youth empowerment strategies, (b) being creative and adaptive, (c) being a positive presence for the youth, (d) applying experiential learning techniques, (e) balancing the integration of culture with youth voice, (f) identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community, (g) community diversity, (h) social issues, (i) staff burn-out.

Article 2 brought the focus to both CM and youth levels and explored perceptions regarding program outcomes. This study provided preliminary evidence that the program is achieving the targeted outcomes of youth development, as well as impacts at the CM and community level. It also had the advantage of providing context and description so that later evaluation efforts can better target expected impacts. Furthermore, providing accounts from two levels of stakeholders increases the validity of findings as there is overlap between the concepts from more than one perspective. The results from this study were organized within three themes describing (a) progressive leadership development, (b) enhanced relationships, and (c) increased community participation. Leadership development was further sub-divided into four subthemes including (a) increased youth engagement, (b) youth life skill development, (c) enhanced youth confidence, and (d) CM skill development. Finally, the community participation theme was divided into two sub-themes that described an increased sense of community and greater partnership among community members.

Chapter IV (Article 3, hereafter), presented a community-based youth participatory evaluation that provided a more detailed examination of the community events that were developed and led by the youth as part of the YLP program in one of the participating communities. This vantage point is firmly from the youth perspective and the youth were involved in: choosing the focus and methodology of the research, contributing to the analysis, and directing the utilization strategy. This article makes an important and novel contribution to the expanding literature on participatory youth methodologies by placing a focus on the inclusion of First Nations youth in implementing a program evaluation using Photovoice. Within the results, the following themes were identified: (a) fun and fulfilling to engage the children, (b)

positive outcomes for the youth leaders, (c) community impacts, (d) challenges, and (e) opportunities for improvement.

The strongest and most pervasive finding from this research was the importance of empowerment, particularly as demonstrated through the support of youth empowerment. Within all three studies, participants at both youth and staff levels emphasized the need for youth to have voice, agency, and influence over the program direction. For example, there were several themes across the articles that relate to the importance of youth empowerment, including “designing youth empowerment strategies”, “balancing the integration of culture with youth voice” (both article 1), “youth life skill development”, “enhanced youth confidence” (both article 2) and “positive outcomes for the youth leaders” (article 3). Furthermore, within article 2 and 3, CMs and youth attested to the positive outcomes that can be developed through leadership-based activities, such as learning to take responsibility, organizational skills, and enhanced confidence.

There is clear support in other research that highlights this notion as well. For example, there is significant evidence that supports the integration of leadership development within PYD programs (Hellison, Martinek, & Walsh, 2008; Lerner et al., 2006; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Zeldin & Camino, 1999). In their review of PYD programming for Indigenous youth, Bruner and colleagues (2015) identified empowerment as a major theme within the positive experiences across studies. Moreover, leadership-based programming among PYD programs for First Nations youth have shown promise (i.e. Crooks, et al., 2015; Crooks, et al., 2010b; Ritchie et al., 2014). Recognizing the potential importance of youth leadership as a component of PYD programs for First Nations youth, programming that incorporates a design similar to the YLP may be a valuable approach to use within other communities.

The results also highlight the need for community empowerment. This was articulated in the findings that described the importance of the flexibility of the program having an important role in supporting success through the adaptation to community context. This was highlighted in article 1 within the discussion of the importance of being creative and adaptable, as well as article 1 and 2 within the description of integrating and enhancing community partnerships. Furthermore, community empowerment may be influenced since, as active community members, youth advocate for the community within their roles in the program. As they build their individual capacity as advocates, they contribute to the collective capacity of the community. Finally, their program experiences may provide the skills and abilities for them to play larger roles in future community development as adult leaders. This is illustrated within article 3, as the findings highlight youth impacts related to skill development and enhanced leadership.

Cultural continuity, a form of community empowerment as indicated by the level of self-governance and community control over services has been linked to decreased youth suicide rates in First Nations communities (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Furthermore, developmental systems theory suggests that positive youth development can result from a mutually positive interaction between an individual and their context (Agans, et al., 2014). These empirical and theoretical arguments support the use of youth leadership strategies that incorporate community contribution and support community empowerment in programming designed to promote positive outcomes for First Nations youth. As such, it is recommended that future programs incorporate this strategy.

Arising from these findings are a number of recommendations in relation to enhancing or increasing empowerment. First, both individual and community empowerment may be enhanced through a purposeful recruitment strategy that attracts community members and youth to become

more involved in leadership roles within the program and organization. This strategy has been recommended in other leadership programs for First Nations youth (Galipeau & Giles, 2014) and could provide Right to Play with invaluable resources upon which to draw personal insight and perspective that is crucial for the meaningful implementation of the program and it also offers opportunities for individuals (both community members and youth) to increase their capacity and to become more empowered.

A second recommendation regarding empowerment has roots in one of the CMs reflections on how PYD programs for First Nations youth could support communities to transition to independence. It may be useful for programs to begin applying models that promote self-governance over the program operations and greater independence. In her discussion of First Nations self-determination in the health system, Kent (2014) identified the multilevel mosaic model as a promising approach. This model includes an elective option whereby community leaders can choose to increase their control over programs and services based on their level of capacity. Communities with greater capacity can become more independent in their operation of programs, while communities in need of more support can build their capacity while receiving more supports. This approach may be useful for other PYD programs for First Nations youth - communities with more experience and greater capacity could have the opportunity to become more independent and take greater control over implementation. It may also be helpful to partner communities of high and low capacity so that they can learn from and support each other.

Finally, based on our findings within article 3, it is recommended that the concept of empowerment should be applied to the research and evaluation lens as well as to program implementation. Participatory research strategies have been recommended by other researchers (Smith, 2012) and there are many other successful examples of participatory research with First

Nations youth (e.g. Hayhurst, et al., 2015; McHugh, Coppola, & Sinclair, 2013). Within the youth participatory evaluation, the youth identified the overall purpose of the study and provided personal insights and voice to the findings, interpretations, and utilization of the results. The participating youth leaders brought their developing expertise and perspective to program design and implementation and through this experience have expanded their skill set with regard to monitoring, evaluation and stakeholder engagement. As a result, we recommend that youth leadership programs incorporate participatory strategies to their research and evaluation efforts.

A second major finding that was identified across the studies was the influence of culture, mainly as expressed through the importance of community, nature, and reflection. The importance of community was the most robust finding relating to culture and was indicated in all three studies as a significant factor. This was highlighted within the importance of community partnerships, the community impacts that resulted from the program, the importance of positive relationships between CMs and youth, and finally the positive relationships that developed amongst the youth themselves.

Other researchers have described the central role that community plays within First Nations health and well-being (Dell, et al., 2011; Kirmayer, et al., 2009; Restoule, Hopkins, Robinson, & Wiebe, 2015). For example, Dell and colleagues (2011) suggest that, unlike the western individualistic perspective within the First Nations cultural view, inner spirit is interconnected and in-separable from family and community. In addition, positive adult-youth relationships has been identified as a key component in effective PYD programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2015). Furthermore, Taylor and Osborne (2010) suggest that a well-defined collective identity provides a necessary foundation for the development of positive self-esteem and well-being. They also argue that for First Nations people, colonization has resulted in a lack

of positive role models and an unclear collective identity, creating widespread social issues. Under these circumstances, it is critical for youth to have positive role models, such as the CMs and other youth in the program that they can relate to.

In light of our findings that highlight the importance of community, we recommend that future programming incorporate activities that involve youth in community contributions. We also recommend that programs work in partnership with other community organizations to better support youth development. Restoule and colleagues (2015) describe the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, which is a model designed to help communities to identify system-level changes that can promote wellness and describes key services that need to be available. Community-based organizations could use this framework to support their strategies for collaboration and to identify service gaps and priorities (Health Canada and the Assembly of First Nations, 2015). Finally, acknowledging the importance of having community members as positive role models, we recommend that future programs involve community members with the same cultural background to implement the program at the frontline level.

Another cultural concept that was identified in this research was the importance of nature and the connection to the land. This was highlighted in one study (Article 1); however, it was also a salient issue that came up in interviews with most communities, among CMs and youth alike. Many of the communities that were involved in the YLP were struggling with major environmental controversies and challenges. The most common issues that were discussed were related to resource extraction, pollution, and sub-standard infrastructure. These included elevated mercury levels in the local water, negotiations around windfarm projects, exposure to petrochemical pollution, boil-water advisories, floods resulting in community evacuations and isolation related to ice road thaw. These circumstances are not uncommon among other reserve

communities in Canada and similar stories have been documented in research and in the media (see for examples Harada et al., 2005; McQuigge, 2012; Sarkar, Hanrahan, & Hudson, 2015). This is particularly concerning since it is known that First Nations health and well-being is intrinsically connected to the land (Dell et al., 2011; Kirmayer et al., 2009).

There is a significant body of research with the general population that identifies a relationship between well-being and exposure to the natural environment (Howell, Dopko, Passmore, & Buro, 2011; Kardan et al., 2015; Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2011; Ryan et al., 2010; Sandifer, Sutton-Grier, & Ward, 2015; Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014) as well as the benefits of outdoor experiential programs for youth (Armour & Sandford, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014). For example, Ritchie and colleagues (2015) describe the ways that an outdoor adventure-based youth leadership program influenced program participants from the Wikwemikong community. The program included a 10-day canoe trip that integrated significant cultural elements including explorations of hunting grounds and local medicines, ceremonies, and teaching from Elders. It also incorporated natural challenges including portages, rapids, orienteering, and a solo component. They found that the program enhanced youth resilience and well-being through their connection to Anishinaabe Bimaadziwin or the Good Life.

Since the environment plays a central role in First Nations values and also represents a major challenge for many communities, we recommend that future programming incorporate an outdoor or nature-based element in their activities. This may facilitate engagement of youth participants and promote well-being. Furthermore, it may enhance youth contributions to community through environmental activism and hopefully, raise general awareness, impact government policies regarding local resource development and alleviate negative environmental impacts.

Finally, oral tradition was another cultural value that was implicated within this research within the participants' reflections of their experiences within the program. This concept did not emerge within any of the analyses presented earlier, however in Article 1 and 2, it is identified as a strength of the methodology and it is illustrated in the findings that capture the reflections and experiences communicated by the Elder, youth and CMs. Further, the influence of this tradition is also demonstrated by an aptitude for storytelling that was shared by many of the participants. Finally, during his interview, the Elder highlighted oral tradition as a significant cultural practice and an important approach he used in sharing his knowledge and teachings with others. He described his first introduction to the art of story-telling during a French-Canadian festival he attended and how it influenced the way he developed this craft:

I went to Festival des Voyageurs, they have story tellers that come in there related to the voyageur and I saw two that I really enjoyed. ... They held the audience's attention. That was what I was looking for: how they do it, they hold them in their hand... And there are people in our people like that, who can tell good stories... Story telling is so approachable and naturally intuitive to them [children and youth], and I think it's really fundamental to traditional styles of teaching.

Other researchers echo the significance the Elder placed on the role of oral tradition within First Nations traditions (Kovach, 2010; Lafrance et al., 2012; Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Furthermore, qualitative research that captures rich narrative detail has been identified as an important approach for research with colonized communities (Kay, 2009; Smith, 2005).

Apart from the significance of oral tradition as a part of First Nations culture, storytelling is being recognized as a powerful approach to support learning in the general population. Researchers have acknowledged that storytelling facilitates learning as it is social and

collaborative, supports retention, enhances meaning and relevance, and increases learner engagement (Davis, 2014; Green, 2004; Lawrence & Paige, 2016; Phillips, 2013). Further, story has the ability to promote inter-personal empathy and understanding by helping the listener to vicariously experience the reality of the story subject (Lawrence & Paige, 2016; Phillips, 2013; Schank & Berman, 2006): “listening to stories around difference helps to promote empathy and understanding, particularly between people of different cultures. It broadens our knowledge. Storytelling has the power to disrupt stereotypes” (Lawrence & Paige, 2016, p. 66). This is particularly relevant if research findings are being used to inform mainstream understanding regarding current First Nations issues and to overcome challenges related to racism.

Recognizing the importance of oral tradition to First Nations knowledge sharing as well as the possible influence narrative results can have on stakeholder perceptions and hopefully policy and program decision making, we recommend the incorporation of an element of qualitative evaluation that allows the capture of personal experience and narrative, meaning the opportunity for participants to tell their stories, in future evaluations of PYD programs for First Nations youth.

This research also highlights that strengths-based PYD programming may be an effective way to promote positive development of First Nations youth. Strengths-based approaches may be an important strategy to promote healing and reconciliation as they have the potential to promote empowerment and provide a foundation for growth (Paraschak & Thompson, 2014). As identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Council (2015):

Reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to

happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour. (p. 6)

The insights derived from this research serve to promote action in establishing reconciliation and harmonious relation among all Canadians.

Overall, this study provides support for the importance of leadership-based and culturally-relevant programs for First Nations youth. It also contributes to the developing research exploring the application of strengths-based approaches with First Nations communities, the literature regarding the evaluation of leadership programming for First Nations youth, the expansion of methodologies in youth-led participatory research and the understanding of strategies for the promotion of youth engagement. This research also contributes to the advancement of knowledge related to developmental systems theory and within this perspective, it is important to highlight the significance of the role of the reciprocal interaction between First Nations youth and their community and socio-cultural environment. The implications of this perspective are that investments in First Nations youth derive re-investments in community and society. However, it is important to acknowledge that in order to move beyond colonial habits, we must place the focus on youth and community needs. This implies that communities must provide direction regarding what should be changed, how to support these developments and whether changes in any one community are desired at all.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Based on the learning derived from this study, there are several lines of research that may be useful to pursue in future. This research examined issues that affect First Nations communities from an individual level, from the vantage point of youth development, as well as the role of community-level influences such as community empowerment.

It is important that future research explore how much individual empowerment can complement community empowerment as well as how these findings can be applied to examine how First Nations community independence can be supported within the larger Canadian community. It may also be useful to identify youth and young adults within First Nations communities who have become successful leaders and to retrospectively examine their experiences to understand the life events and factors they perceive as influencing their development. Moreover, given that this program is being implemented in 88 communities across four provinces it may also be fruitful to connect with graduates of this program who have become community leaders and explore their perceptions of which elements of the program were most beneficial or effective. Finally, this research was qualitative and only examined preliminary information regarding program outcomes. Many other program evaluations have avoided outcome evaluation in light of the negative history of positivist research with First Nations communities, however this calls into question the ethics of this research and the justification of these programs. It must be recognized that negative past events using traditional scientific approaches should not eclipse the accountability of these programs and organizations to create real change in these communities. First Nations youth deserve the best interventions possible - that include culturally relevant considerations and a community-driven approach that are, if not guaranteed to work, at least have the highest probability of success. Future evaluation research should continue to pursue this goal of incorporating culturally relevant considerations together with a clear examination of program impacts in order to provide the best possible programs and services for First Nations youth.

## **Limitations**

Beyond the limitations already noted in the three articles, there were several over-arching limitations of the study. Within the organizational context, there were some coordination issues that could be improved. These were related to difficulties in developing community partnerships, timing of communication, and succession planning. There were also limitations related to the duration of time the researcher spent in community and the conflict of interest that is inherent to developing relationships for the purposes of community-based research. These are discussed in more detail below.

First of all, there was a need for more support from the Right to Play administration in connecting the researchers with interested community leaders. An opportunity was made for the researchers to provide presentations about possible evaluation opportunities to CMs at a training and an email was sent out inviting CMs to participate. The intent of these communications were to inform CMs of the research opportunity and allow them to bring the idea back to their community supervisors. These strategies were not very successful in generating connections. This may have resulted from the fact that most CMs have a child and youth worker background and might not have had a strong enough understanding of research and evaluation in order to recognize the possible benefits. In spite of this, the presentations given to the CMs at training did generate interest in a small group of CMs. However, since these CMs did not have authority over program decisions, when they later sought supervisory permission in their community, they could not attain the buy-in needed to move forward. Only one of these leads was successful, largely because the associated CM was also a councillor within the Band and Council of his community.

The exception to this issue was in the case of the third study whereby concerted efforts were made by one of the Right to Play directors in supporting the connection made with the community involved. In this instance, the director identified the program as an example of a community that had achieved significant success and that was led by a strong CM. She also identified that this program could garner administrative support in advancing the community-based evaluation. Finally, she supported the researcher in making the connection with the community and in the consideration of specific requirements to enhance the relationship.

Other limitations related to the organization-university partnership were that communications lagged behind program and research milestones and there was not a significant amount of succession planning. Frequently, ethical and procedural issues were identified at a later stage making it difficult to collect or use data. For example, initially there was an understanding that interviews conducted by RTP staff would also be able to be used as data through a secondary analysis but this was later denied by RTP leadership. There were also many instances where there were leads generated by research and evaluation discussions that were later abandoned. For example, at the outset of the project, there was an interest in examining program outcomes and several attempts were made to identify culturally relevant measures or community indicators that could support this inquiry. Neither of these directions moved forward as there was a lack support from RTP to collect the data when it came time for such evaluation. Furthermore, over the duration of this research, there was significant turnover in Directors responsible for the program and Monitoring and Evaluation Officers assigned to this initiative. With each transition, a new individual brought a different perspective and approach to the partnership. This affected the continuity of methods and created difficulties in maintaining trust and buy-in to procedures and planning that had been made prior to a new individual's involvement.

Another general limitation that has affected this study overall was the limited amount of time the researcher spent in community. This was the result of different factors. For example, the participatory research had to be implemented during a limited amount of program time, and as such, could not be extended over a longer period. There was also a limited amount of travel funding. To alleviate this issue, efforts were made to develop partnerships with communities that were located closer to the university. However, these projects did not progress because of a lack of buy-in with the community administration. Finally, the lead researcher was limited in the length of stay she could commit to as she had a young family and could not leave home for extended periods of time.

The final limitation of this study is relevant for all research that takes place in relationship with community. This form of research is inherently affected by the fact that the foundational purpose of the relationship is to fulfill a research agenda. As a result, there is an intrinsic conflict of interest as the relationship is not developed for the sole purpose of fostering a connection, but for the purposes of achieving research goals. This is further complicated by the fact that the researcher's performance is likely measured in research deliverables such as publications or the requirements of their degree. These end goals may be at odds with relationship development as they can impose specific timelines and investments that may not be specifically designed to benefit the community.

Relatedly, but on a more positive note, there are many benefits that can result from the development of the community research partnership. The researcher has the opportunity to learn from experiential insights that can only be developed within community. They also have the honour of working with dedicated and inspirational individuals within these communities. Despite the initial intention of developing relationship for research purposes, developing a

connection with positive and caring individuals for the mutual purpose of supporting youth development is a beneficial opportunity for the researcher and hopefully for the community members as well. Further, it creates opportunities for capacity building, knowledge sharing and future research. Finally, research partnerships that result from these circumstances have the advantage of stimulating future research collaborations. These *would be built on an authentic existing relationship* with mutually identified goals and would not be affected by an intrinsic conflict of interest.

### **YLP Specific Recommendations**

In future, community partnership development could be better supported if Right to Play leadership identified champions at higher administrative levels within communities. Rather than linking researchers with frontline program staff who would not have the authority to make decisions about new initiatives, they could create connections with community administration who might have an interest in evaluation support and could authorize the advancement of community-based projects. RTP leadership could identify these opportunities in advance and provide hands-on support to develop the relationship between researchers and community-based program staff. Other research within First Nations communities has been successful where the community demonstrates a true interest in examining community-based programming and in utilizing evaluation results to support community initiatives (e.g. Ritchie et al., 2015; Young, 2013).

We also recommend the development of a shared strategy and communication plan between RTP and the research team to support future research partnerships. Creating a strategy to support the partnership that included a timeline of regular communications would help to support the efficient collection of data that aligns with program milestones and the practical

communication of findings to support program development. Open and timely communications could also result in better contributions from the researchers in terms of the development of internal evaluation capacity and infrastructure as well as stronger planning and implementation of procedures. Succession planning that included the involvement of multiple individuals within the research partnership would also enhance the continuity of the research and the effectiveness of the research partnership. Therefore, if one individual left the organization, there would be other individuals who would be aware of past and current developments and who could continue to move the project forward.

With regard to programming, applying a flexible approach that supports youth and community empowerment has been an effective strategy. Right to Play should continue to build on this approach by increasing community ownership of the program, adjusting funding allocations that support community ownership, and placing a stronger focus on integrating Indigenous perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

This research described an evaluation of a sports-based youth leadership program for First Nations youth that applied a broader qualitative exploration of program implementation and perceived outcomes as well as a more focused participatory evaluation with one community. The results highlight successes, challenges, perceived positive impacts and opportunities for improvement. The methods and findings are relevant for practitioners and researchers working in community-based programs for First Nations youth. This research contributes to the literature regarding strengths-based programming for First Nations communities and leadership programming within PYD. It also advances knowledge regarding the progression of youth

engagement and developmental systems theory and provides new insights and recommendations for applied and research audiences.

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## STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS

This dissertation describes a research project within a larger study that was initiated by a partnership between the PLAY program leadership staff at Right to Play and the research team at the University of Ottawa, which included Dr. Alexandra Arellano, Dr. Tanya Forneris, Dr. Eric MacIntosh, Cindy Gaudet, Jared Kope and Tanya Halsall. Ethics approval was received from the University for the larger project and pertained to this study as well.

The conceptualization of this research design was made jointly by Dr. Forneris and Tanya Halsall. Dr. Forneris met with Tanya Halsall on a bi-weekly basis and was also available when needed to provide advice and direction through the duration of the study. She also provided significant guidance in navigating the research partnership with Right to Play, support when making decisions regarding design, assistance with interpretations of literature and findings, and constructive feedback for manuscript revisions. In preparation for this study, Tanya Halsall performed a literature review to identify relevant research, measures and methods. She also prepared all materials used during data collection, including interview guides, consent forms, presentations, activities and knowledge exchange materials. She coordinated travel arrangements and email correspondence to plan travel logistics. She also conducted all interviews and focus groups, with the exception of two youth at the Youth Symposium, who were interviewed by Dr. Forneris and one focus group that was conducted by Tony Jacobs. The interviews were transcribed primarily by Tanya Halsall as well as Nissa Coghlan-Kerr, one of Dr. Forneris' undergraduate students. The analyses were completed by Tanya Halsall and were reviewed by Dr. Forneris. All three articles and the main body of the thesis were drafted and revised by Tanya Halsall and Dr. Forneris provided several rounds of feedback for each.

Dr. Forneris, Dr. Arellano, Dr. MacIntosh, Cindy Gaudet and Tanya Halsall also met with the Right to Play staff on an interim basis in order to align the evaluation to meet organizational needs. They provided regular feedback to Right to Play after participation in trainings and community visits as well as a report communicating the overall findings of the study.

Right to Play staff facilitated the arrangements for most data collection visits. They also provided feedback regarding the workshops that were developed for the CM knowledge exchange and the participatory evaluation activities. Finally, they helped to coordinate consent form collection. Terry Swan, a director at Right to Play, established the Research Advisory who made important contributions on several occasions to the design, ethical considerations and interpretation of this research. Terry also identified the community involved with the participatory evaluation in Article 3 and made the connection with the CM. The community CM helped to coordinate the four visits made to the community and communicated with the Band and Council about the project. He also helped with the collection of consent forms, facilitated the photo collection during the community event and conducted one of the focus groups. The CM within the second community helped to coordinate the visit and communicated with his Band and Council about the project. He also helped to facilitate the collection of consent forms.

**Appendix A: Interview guides****Community Mentor interview guide**

1. Please describe your community and the youth you are working with.
2. How do you administer the program in your community?
3. Please describe your background and any experience you have in youth programming.
4. How was your experience being a Community Mentor in the YLP? Any stories/examples?
5. How does your work with the YLP compare to other work you have done with youth?
6. What was your greatest success?
7. What was your greatest challenge?
8. Were you able to adapt the program to fit with the culture/values/way of life in your community?
  - a. Why/Why not?
  - b. Please describe.
9. Were you able to adjust the programming to suit the needs of your community?
  - a. What did you do?
10. What was not easily adaptable?
11. Were you able to involve Elders?
12. Other community partners?
  - a. Why/Why not?
13. How did this affect the program?
14. Are there any other people/partners/organizations who should be involved in the future who could make the program better?
15. In what ways did youth engage in directing the flow of the program? Can you give some examples?
16. Did you experience any difficulties implementing the program? Please describe.
17. What part of the program do you feel made the biggest impact? Why?
18. Was there good participation from the youth in the activities?
19. Did you receive adequate support from RTP? Why/Why not?
20. What are some ways that RTP could support you better?
21. What do you think could help improve your performance as a Community Mentor?

**Youth interview guide**

1. How long have you been coming to program?
2. What kinds of things do you do at program?
3. Did you know any of the other youth before you started coming?
4. What do you like about the program?
5. Have you done any other programs or youth groups before?
6. How does the YLP compare to the other programs?
7. What do you like best about the program?
8. Is there anything you don't like?
9. How would you change it?
10. Is it easy for you to get to program?
11. What kinds of leadership activities do you do in the program?
12. In what ways were you able to get involved in making decisions about the YLP?
13. What do you think of Tony?
  - a. How does he compare to other program leaders you have had?
14. RTP is a western program that has been adapted to include aboriginal values and culture... do you think it works?
  - a. Why?
15. What kinds of skills have you learned in the program?
16. Has anything about you changed because of coming to the program?
  - a. How about the other participants?
17. Describe a community event.
  - a. Who comes out?
  - b. Why do you think they are important?

## Community event – youth focus group guide

### Participation

1. What did the participants think of the event?
  - a. What was their experience like
  - b. How did they feel
2. Who normally attends these events
3. Who else should come out that isn't coming yet?
4. How can we get more people involved?

### Purpose

1. How does the community benefit from the event?
2. Why are these events important?
3. How can we make them even better for the community?

### Skills

5. For the community event, what were you responsible for?
  - a. Before
  - b. During
  - c. After
6. What did you learn?
7. What skills would you like to develop during future community events

## Appendix B: Consent Forms

### Community Mentor Consent Form

TITLE: Evaluation of a sports-based positive youth development program for First Nations.

Researchers: Tanya Halsall, PhD student; Tanya Forneris, Assistant Professor; School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Canada.

Contact: Tanya Halsall, E-mail: [REDACTED]

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is understand the impact of the PLAY program on youth development.

Participation: My participation will consist of taking part in one interview. This interview will last between 1 and 1.5 hours. The interview will be audio-recorded and will be held at a time and place convenient for me.

Risks: There are no anticipated negative effects or risks during or following participation in this project.

Benefits: My participation in this study will benefit the advancement of knowledge in the field of community-based programming, and in particular, programming for youth in First Nation communities. This work will in turn help others develop and implement more effective programming for youth. In addition, this research provides me with the opportunity to express my own thoughts and opinions related to the PLAY program.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance that the researcher will strictly keep the information I share with her confidential. I understand that the content will be used only for the analysis of perceptions, experiences of the PLAY program. Also, I understand that anonymity is guaranteed in the sense that my name, or any other identifiable information, will not be recorded or included in the transcripts or any of the subsequent publications. Moreover, my specific role at Right to Play will not be mentioned. Direct quotations might be included in academic publications but my name and all identifying details will be removed.

Conservation of data: The audio-recordings will be encrypted and kept in a secure manner in the personal computer of the researcher which is password protected. The information will be kept for 10 years in a digital format that will be securely lodged within the researcher's workplace. After a period of 10 years the files will be erased.

Voluntary Participation; I am under no obligation to participate and after beginning to participate, I can stop and withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any question, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all information that I have supplied up until that time will be deleted from the digital recording and no copies will be kept in any other format whatsoever.

Acceptance: I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of the participant), agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Tanya Halsall of the School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Canada.

I wish to receive a copy of any publication using this material:

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

If I have any questions about the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher by phone at 613-

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I understand that I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Avenue, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, [REDACTED]

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Youth Consent Form

TITLE: Evaluation of a sports-based positive youth development program for First Nations.

This form may have some words that you do not know. Please ask the researcher or your leaders to explain any words that you do not know.

Researchers: Tanya Halsall, PhD student; Tanya Forneris, Assistant Professor; School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Canada.

Contact: Tanya Halsall, E-mail: [REDACTED]

What is this study about?

The purpose of this research is to understand your experience in the the PLAY program and whether or not this program is positive for youth.

What happens to me if I choose to be in this study?

If you are in this study you will be invited to participate in three surveys, three interviews and one focus group. The surveys will take about 30 minutes, the interviews will take between 1-2 hours each and the focus group will take about 2 hours. The interviews and focus groups will be recorded. You will be asked questions about what you liked, what you did not like, what you learned in the program and how you feel.

You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer and you can stop the questionnaire or interview at any time.

How can the study help?

It will help the researchers learn more about the PLAY program. It can also help them know what you think about the program and whether you like it.

Will you tell anyone what I say?

We will not tell anyone the answers you give us. We will not share your answers with your parents, teachers, friends, or anyone else. Also, when discussing or writing about this research, we will never use your name.

Questions?

If you have any questions about being in this study, you can call or have your parent call or write: Tanya Halsall at [REDACTED]

Consent: I have read this form and I understand the information about this study. I am willing to be in this study.

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Youth name printed	Youth signature	Date
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Signature of person conducting informed consent:	Date
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## Parental Consent Form

TITLE: Evaluation of a sports-based positive youth development program for First Nations.

This form may have some words that you do not know. Please ask the researcher or your leaders to explain any words that you do not know.

Researchers: Tanya Halsall, PhD student; Tanya Forneris, Assistant Professor; School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Canada.

Contact: Tanya Halsall, E-mail: [REDACTED]

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is understand the impact of the PLAY program on youth development.

Participation: If you provide consent for your child to participate in this research project, s/he will be invited to participate in three surveys, three interviews and one focus group. The interviews and focus group will take approximately 1-2 hours and will be audio-taped. In this interview your child will be asked questions related to their experience in the PLAY program offered by Right to Play (e.g., what did they like about the program?, what did they not like about the program?, what did they learn in the program?) as well as youth development, cultural knowledge and well-being. The surveys should take about 30 minutes in total and ask questions about youth development, cultural knowledge and well-being.

Risks: We do not anticipate any negative effects during or following participation in this project.

Benefits: The participation of your child in this project will help contribute to our understanding of whether youth benefit from participating in a program like PLAY. Past research has not been conducted on the experience of First Nation youth in these types of programs and therefore this is an important first step in that process. In addition, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, youth have civil rights to participate in society and to express their views about matters concerning their lives and future. This research can be used to ensure that programs are developed to engage and benefit youth.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: The anonymity of your child will be protected. Apart from the consent form and the assent form completed by your child, the name of your child will not be written on any documents. This consent form and your child's assent form will be placed in a locked filing cabinet within a locked office and filed separately from the interviews. Also, the audio-recordings of the interviews will be placed in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. At the end of the project the data will be kept secure for a period of ten years, after which all of the data will be destroyed.

Recording Procedures: The interviews will be recorded using a digital voice recorder. No identifying information (e.g., name) will be recorded. However, if you prefer not to have the interview recorded, handwritten notes will be taken.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: The participation of your child is completely voluntary. S/he may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty. Also, your decision to allow your child to participate or not will not impact his or her school performances in any way.

If you have any questions regarding this research project you can contact me by phone at 613-562-5800 ext. [REDACTED]

For any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this project, you can contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, 550 rue Cumberland, Room 159, Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5, (613) [REDACTED]

Consent: I have read this consent form and I understand the procedures of this research project. Also, I understand that the participation of my child is completely voluntary and s/he may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. My signature indicates my consent for my child to participate.

I permit my child to participate in this project

I permit my child to participate in this project but do not permit the interview to be audio-taped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child (Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Second Parent/Guardian (if applicable)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Youth Assent Form

TITLE: Evaluation of a sports-based positive youth development program for First Nations.

This form may have some words that you do not know. Please ask the researcher or your leaders to explain any words that you do not know.

Researchers: Tanya Halsall, PhD student; Tanya Forneris, Assistant Professor; School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Canada.

Contact: Tanya Halsall, E-mail: [REDACTED]

What is this study about?

The purpose of this research is to understand your experience in the the PLAY program and whether or not this program is positive for youth.

What happens to me if I choose to be in this study?

If you are in this study you may be invited to participate in three surveys, three interviews and one focus group. The surveys will take about 30 minutes, the interviews will take between 1-2 hours each and the focus group will take about 2 hours. If you give permission, the interviews and focus groups will be recorded. You will be asked questions about what you liked, what you did not like, what you learned in the program and how you feel.

You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer and you can stop the questionnaire or interview at any time.

How can the study help?

It will help the researchers learn more about the PLAY program. It can also help them know what you think about the program and whether you like it.

Will you tell anyone what I say?

We will not tell anyone the answers you give us. We will not share your answers with your parents, teachers, friends, or anyone else. Also, when discussing or writing about this research, we will never use your name.

Questions?

If you have any questions about being in this study, you can call or have your parent call or write: Tanya Halsall at [REDACTED]

Consent: I have read this form and I understand the information about this study. I am willing to be in this study.

---

Youth name printed

Youth signature

Date

---

Signature of person conducting informed consent:

Date

## Appendix C: Ethics Certificate

File Number: H10-11-08

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 11/22/2013



**Université d'Ottawa** **University of Ottawa**  
 Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

## Ethics Approval Notice

## Health Sciences and Science REB

## Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Alexandra	Arellano	Health Sciences / Human Kinetics	Principal Investigator
Tanya	Fomeris	Health Sciences / Human Kinetics	Co-investigator
Jean	Harvey	Health Sciences / Human Kinetics	Co-investigator
Jared	Kope	Health Sciences / Human Kinetics	Co-investigator
Eric	MacIntosh	Health Sciences / Human Kinetics	Co-investigator
Julia	Porter	Others / Others	Other Collaborator
Terry	Swan	Others / Others	Other Collaborator
Cindy	Gaudet	Health Sciences / Human Kinetics	Research Assistant
Tanya	Halsall	Health Sciences / Human Kinetics	Research Assistant

File Number: H10-11-08

Type of Project: Professor

Title: Building Sustainable Youth Development Sports Programs for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Populations

<b>Renewal Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Approval Type</b>
01/17/2014	01/16/2015	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

Special Conditions / Comments:

N/A



**Université d'Ottawa**  
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

**University of Ottawa**  
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at:

<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at:

<http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: [ethics@uOttawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uOttawa.ca).

**Signature:**



Mélanie Rioux

Ethics Coordinator

For Gilles Morier, Acting Director of the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity



Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 11/22/2013

Service de subventions de recherche et déontologie

Research Grants and Ethics Services

H10-11-08