Indigenous Youth’s Perspectives on their Environments:
“We Need to Keep This Community Clean, Safe, and Good.”

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Abstract

It is vitally important that Indigenous youth are provided a forum to express and share their expertise and knowledge on all matters that affect and impact their lives. Through the use of photo-voice, this qualitative study provided the space for eleven youth from the Northern Village of La Loche, Saskatchewan to share their perspectives on their community and environment, their lives, and how they conceptualize childhood. Employing the theoretical frameworks of the Sociology of Childhood, children’s rights, desire-centred research framework, and an Indigenous culturally responsive method, four over-arching themes emerged – the importance of: i) relationships; ii) health and well-being; iii) knowledge; and iv) community and culture. The youth in this study demonstrated their capacity to identify and share their unique perspectives on their community and proficiencies in assessing their community’s strengths and challenges – further demonstrating that youth are not merely passive subjects of social structures, but competent citizens able to contribute to change in genuine ways.

Keywords: Indigenous, youth, community, change, research, children
Introduction

This project contributes to our understanding of the importance of listening to Indigenous youth. Through photo-voice, this project created a space to seek out and attempt to understand youth perspectives of their community and environment, their lives, and how they conceptualize childhood. This qualitative study took the form of a community-based research project to understand the perspectives of 11 Northern Indigenous youth. Ten youth in this study live in La Loche, Saskatchewan, a small northern village with a population of roughly 2,370 people, over half of which are under the age of 24-years (Statistics Canada, 2017), and roughly 93.5% of which identify as Aboriginal (Keewatin Yathë Regional Health Authority, 2016). One youth in this study is from Clearwater River Dene Nation, the local reserve just ten minutes north of La Loche with a population of roughly 1,000 (Meadow Lake Tribal Council, 2018).

Background

On January 22, 2016, La Loche and its surrounding area became the target of much publicity and national attention following a tragic school shooting that occurred at their local high school. In the first days following the shooting, the quiet Northern community was inundated with an influx of outsiders’ opinions, views, and ‘expertise’ about the town and its people. Some wrote about poor living conditions, relaxed gun control laws, and the lack of youth supports (Watters, 2016). Others discussed the underfunding of social programs and persistent drug and alcohol addictions (Johnstone, 2016). Still, some noted naively and in a discriminatory manner that poverty and violence are just an inherent part of living in Canada’s North (Gilmore, 2016). This outsider portrayal of the community painted La Loche with a single negative stroke, emphasizing the ‘problem’ as existing within the community itself, all the while overlooking the views and opinions of the people who lived there, and never seeking the perspectives of children and youth. It was this lack of community representation and, more specifically, the lack of consultation with children and youth that became the impetus for this study. Thus, the purpose of this project was to create a space for youth from La Loche to share their perspectives of their town, their lives, and their childhoods as a way to offer important insight into what they personally deem important and necessary.
The article begins with a personal reflection by one of the authors of the article (Wood) and her connections to the community of La Loche. This section is followed by a discussion of the relevant literature and approaches used to explore Indigenous youths’ perspectives. The data collection methods used in this study are described and findings and subsequent discussion follow in the final two sections.

**Methodological Considerations**

Fundamental to Indigenous methodology is the practice of the researcher locating themselves in the research context (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Absolon and Willett (2005) question the possibility of objective research and stress the importance of self-identification as a means to ensure accountability, build trust, and decolonize research. This practice is similar to many Indigenous cultures whereby locating oneself at the beginning of a cultural tradition or meeting is an essential way to self-identify with the larger community (Koster, Baccar, & Lemelin, 2012). To respect this tradition, the following account situates first author Caitlin Wood as a researcher, a settler ally, and a friend to the La Loche community.

Wood is connected to the Northern Village of La Loche through her older brother Adam Wood. On January 22, 2016, Adam died as a result of the school shooting that took place in La Loche, Saskatchewan. He had arrived in the community six months previously to begin his teaching career and spoke very highly of the community and his time there. It was through this tragic loss that a connection was made between Wood and the village of La Loche. The loss of Adam Wood bridged a gap across cultures and understandings, and the formation of a relationship built on mutual respect and collective healing took root. It was through this relationship, through conversations had, and connections made, that Wood gained particular insights into the hegemonic racism, regionalism, and ageism affecting communities such as La Loche. Thus, the aim of this study was to interrupt this intentional erasure of community expertise and to purposefully create a space for youth to share their knowledge and perspectives of their community.
Literature Review

A review of the historical factors that contextualise the experiences of Indigenous children in Canada illuminates these experiences as well as the extent to which they, and adults, are able to create spaces where Indigenous children are accurately heard. These factors impact and create the current settler-colonial context while also illustrating the importance of recognizing youth as active participants in their own lives in order to offer critical and important insights into their lives and culture, which may otherwise go unheard.

An Era of Apology and Reconciliation

For over a century, Canada has been committed to the silencing of Indigenous voices through the denial of Indigenous rights, the elimination of Aboriginal governments, the termination and/or blatant refusal to honour treaties, and through the violence of assimilative practices (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a). Although steps have been taken by individuals, communities, institutions and government agencies to recognize and rectify the violence committed to Indigenous communities across Canada, in what Alfred (2010) terms as a “global era of apology and reconciliation”, the process has only just begun.

On June 1, 2018, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was officially established and developed a five-year mandate to focus on “a sincere indication and acknowledgement of the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, para. 1)… and to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a para. 2). Though the final report was published in 2015 and identifies 94 calls to action, the TRC’s potential to allow and facilitate genuine reconciliation relies heavily on how the emotional stories and experiences are viewed, heard, and remembered (Cook, 2017). These transformations must occur “at all levels of governance, administration and implementation, for all ages and all times” (Greenwood, 2016, p. 27).

One common critique of the TRC is that it positions the harms and violence of colonization strictly in the past while failing to recognize the reality of an ongoing colonial present (Nagy, 2013; Coulthard, 2014). Contemporary Canada is situated within a settler colonial context defined by the specific establishment of colonisation in which the colonizer comes to stay (Tuck
The results of a National Benchmark Survey (2008) prepared for the TRC, demonstrated that half of the Canadian population (51%), reported being “at least somewhat familiar with current Aboriginal issues, fewer than one in ten (8%) report they are very familiar with these issues” (p. 7), and that a full one-third (32%) of Canadians “feel they are not very familiar with Aboriginal issues” (p.7). This lack of awareness and knowledge of crucial Indigenous issues is not solely a demonstration of the failings of our education system, but also the utilization of a colonial strategy; namely, that of proclaiming ignorance as a way to escape responsibility and culpability (Regan, 2010). As stated by the TRC (2015b), this lack of historical knowledge has serious consequences on the lives of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. In the government realm, it results in poor policy decisions that may have devastating effects and, in the public realm, it can reinforce racist attitudes and contribute to public distrust between Aboriginal Peoples and other Canadians (TRC, 2015b). Many Canadians may not understand the many contributions made by Aboriginal people to this country, nor do they understand that by both historic and modern treaties negotiated by our government, we are all treaty people. Moreover, articles 18, 19, and 23 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN General Assembly, 2007) recognize the right of Indigenous peoples to participate in decision-making and to inform policy and infrastructure affecting them; yet, populations of Indigenous people continue to be overlooked and/or ignored (Nicol, 2016). The effects of this intentional and ongoing colonization are far reaching and felt most harshly by society’s most vulnerable population; namely, children and youth.

**Youth As ‘Keepers of their Culture.’**

Indigenous populations within Canada are the fastest growing and youngest population (Statistics Canada, 2011). The median age of the Indigenous population in Canada is 28-years compared to a 41-year-old median age of non-Indigenous persons (Statistics Canada, 2011); one-third of the total Indigenous population is under 14-years (Adelson, 2005). This means that conditions affecting Indigenous children impact a substantial percentage of the overall population of Indigenous persons living in Canada. If the lives of Indigenous Canadians are to be accurately represented in policy, research, and practice, it is imperative to seek to understand the perceptions of children and youth.
Youth are vital to a culture, a way of knowing, and a way of being (Greenwood, 2016) and hold unique perspectives about their lives and their surrounding environments due to their individual standpoints and specific generational culture (Mayall, 2002). When engaged in the process of envisioning community change, including youth as competent social actors means they are able to contribute to change in meaningful and authentic ways (Skovdol & Andreouli, 2011). This is especially true of the youth in La Loche. Currently, La Loche is in a time of transition. Federal and provincial politicians and external funders are looking at La Loche and attempting to evaluate surrounding environments and available supports for youth in order to assess the best ways to move forward. The provincial government has established a Northern Education Action Plan to attempt to address the challenges faced by northern Saskatchewan children and youth (University of Saskatchewan, 2017) while the federal government has designated more than $2 million for a youth wellness and crime prevention program (Youth Project in Northern Saskatchewan, 2017).

A number of studies have demonstrated that by seeking the expertise of youth community members, positive gains can be made for both the individual youth participants involved and for their communities (Rasmus, Ford, & Allen, 2011; Skovdol & Andreouli, 2011; Reich, et al., 2017; Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010). A study that engaged youth from various Indigenous communities across the north in a community-based participant research study explored youth perspectives on stressors and well-being (Rasmus, Ford & Allen, 2011). The authors found that youth were not only skilled at identifying personal stressors and brainstorming effective solutions, they also reported an increase in the positive impact when they were actively involved in research, both personally and throughout their community (Rasmus, Ford, & Allen, 2011).

Moreover, when youth in the Mi’kmaq community of Eskasoni, Nova Scotia were asked how they felt about their involvement in research, they listed a number of positive outcomes (Reich, et al., 2017). By being involved in research, youth shared that their relationships with other participants and community members were strengthened, that it enhanced their own personal capacity and fostered skill development, and that it “improved [their] general understanding of the social world [they] move in” (Reich, et al., 2017, p. 8).

Furthermore, involving youth in research provides opportunities to become empowered critical thinkers and community planners (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010). For
instance, Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, and Aoun engaged youth in a photo-voice project to heighten youth’s awareness of their value within their community while also promoting local organizations’ and external funders’ understanding of how to best support youth in the community. Through this process, youth identified core areas of improvement and local organizations shifted their work to centre around youth’s specific concerns (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2010). When youth are seen as experts, not only do programs better meet their unique needs and desires, they also provide an opportunity to gain deeper insight and awareness about the important role youth play in their own communities (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2010). Similarly, the objective of the present study was to provide a safe space for youth to conceptualize their community and share their ideas by offering what Laura Lundy refers to as: 1) space (opportunity for children to express their views), 2) voice (acting as a facilitator for children to express their views), 3) audience (listening to children’s views), and 4) influence (acting on children’s views) (Lundy, 2007, p. 933).

Children are keepers of their culture and holders of specific knowledges (Little Bear, 2000). In this research project, youth live in a community where over 90% of the region’s population identifies as Aboriginal (KWRHA, 2016). In terms of health outcomes, within Canada, Indigenous peoples are often found at the high end of negative health indicators and the low end of positive health indicators largely situating them within the dominant and Western ‘at risk’ category (Greenwood, de Leeuw, & Fraser, 2007; Eni, 2009). However, diverse Indigenous nations have demonstrated resiliency for thousands of years prior to the arrival of colonial powers and they continue to survive despite the trauma brought on to them by colonialism (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). The problem is not that Indigenous populations lack resiliency; rather, it is that normatively prescribed resiliency markers and health indicators, in their very design, exclude Indigenous ways of being. These traditional Indigenous notions of well-being and communal cultural knowledge embedded in religious, spiritual, and subsistence activities were (and continue to be) actively suppressed, displaced and eroded by generations of Euro-Canadian missionaries, governments, policy makers, and professionals (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005; Kirmayer, et al., 2003). To combat this avoidance and suppression of Indigenous views of well-being, attempts must be made to respect understandings of success and happiness from the contexts out of which they came, and to empower youth to connect and share these cultural perspectives (Young, et al., 2013). The TRC (specifically 10, 19) specifies particular calls to
action that must be respected and adopted; articles in the UNDRIP (specifically 18, 19, and 23) speak to the need for ongoing consultation and consent of Indigenous populations when making decisions that affect them. Only when truly seeking, listening, and respecting these perspectives can policies be created to effect change that meets the needs of community members.

Exploring Indigenous Youth Perspectives

A child rights-based perspective underpins this study. Informed by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly, 1989), this perspective posits that children are citizens that have inherent and distinct human rights that must be acknowledged and respected. Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC state that children have the right to form opinions and the right to be heard (UN General Assembly, 1989). This perspective informs the design and facilitation of the present study. In combination with theoretical perspectives drawn from the sociology of childhood, the study seeks to recognize children and youth as active participants in their own lives and in their surrounding worlds (Albanese, 2009; Christenson & Prout 2002; Mayall, 2002). The intention behind this framework is to ensure that children are able to participate in “contexts where they have been denied those rights of participation and their voices have remained unheard” (Christensen & James, 2000, p. 2). The three key elements of this framework as they relate to research are: that children can create valid meanings of their world and their place in it; that children’s understandings of the world are different from, but not inferior to, those of adults; and that children have unique perspectives and insights that can improve adult’s understandings of children’s experiences (MacNaughton, 2007). By providing the youth in this study with a space to participate, youth offer insights into their specific and unique needs within their communities and environments.

Moreover, the present study challenges historical efforts to define Indigenous peoples and communities based on either deficit models that emphasize the ‘problem’ as existing within the person, family or community or damage-centred approaches that emphasize persons as impaired due to historical and social problems (Tuck, 2009). The deficit model looks to historical exploitation, assimilation, and colonization (among other acts of violence) to explain the prevalence of particular risk factors within Indigenous cultures and may, in turn, define a population of people by their oppression rather than their triumphs and successes (Tuck, 2009). Instead, Tuck (2009) posits that a desire-centred research approach continues to account for loss,
despair and risks, but foregrounds dimensions of hope, pride, and wisdom of lives lived well (Tuck, 2009). The present study uses a desire-centred approach. It ensured that facets of the research process, such as the interview questions, were strength and desire based rather than based on community challenges or shortfalls.

The high percentage of the population who self-identify as Aboriginal in La Loche (93.5%) (KYRHA, 2016) shaped the Indigenous culturally responsive method utilized for this study. Moreover, it draws on Piquemal’s (2000) four principles to guide research with Indigenous populations. These principles are: 1) to establish a partnership before seeking consent in order to ensure consent is informed; 2) to consult with relevant authorities (Elders, parents, children); 3) to continually confirm consent (and assent) throughout the research process to give participants the opportunity to change their mind or reflect on their perspectives given; and 4) to provide participants with the findings before the report is finalized. For the present study, a research advisory committee was established that included the school Elder, the principal, and the adult advisor on the Dené Student Council. Consent was sought from the local tribal council, by informing the chief of the local reserve, through the local school board, and from all youth involved in the study. Participants were actively engaged throughout the research process and provided with many opportunities to change/revise/remove their narratives. Finally, all findings were shared with participants for their feedback. Participants received a copy of the research in the form of a photo-book which they later shared at a community gathering. These methods called for on-going consent, member checking, and depended on the creation of a trustworthy relationship. However, tension exists between an Indigenous culturally responsive method and the children’s rights-based approach. An Indigenous culturally responsive method focuses on collective rights whereas the children’s rights-based approach focuses, for the most part, on individual rights in relational contexts. To ensure successful employment of both frameworks children’s perspectives and rights connect and relate to community rights and perspectives (Caplan, Loomis & Di Santo, 2016). In keeping with these approaches, this study included a research advisory committee that offered their wisdom, feedback, and suggestions.

The Project

Children and youth – more specifically Indigenous children and youth – have long been “objects of inquiry” (Dockett & Perry, 2005, p. 5). This means that historically, research has been done on them instead of with them. For this reason, the aim was to engage youth in the
research process to learn about their unique way of seeing their world. In keeping with the theoretical frameworks that guided this study, data collection took place within the local high school and throughout the community (as decided by the youth). The local school was the chosen environment for focused conversations due to the youth’s familiarity and comfort in engaging in specific tasks within that space.

Two research questions guided the present study: “What are the youth’s vision for their school and community?” and “How do youth in the community conceptualize childhood?” Eleven youth participants between the ages of 13 and 19-years (8F, 3M) who attended the local high school participated in the study. Nine used their real names while two created pseudonyms. Nine of the eleven students identified as Dené First Nations, one identified as Métis, and one identified as both Dené and Métis. Ten students lived in La Loche and one participant lived on the local reserve.

Using a qualitative approach that took the form of community-based research, community partners and participants were invited to draw on their own experiences to share decision-making responsibilities and build on community capacity (Castleden, Gavin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008; Israel, Schulz, Paker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler, 2004). Given the intention of this study, photo-voice was selected as a method for collecting data. Photo-voice, rooted in democratic ideals and intended to create spaces for participants to influence policy (Wang, 2005; Wang & Burris, 1997), is a process of data collection that involves taking photos to illustrate and provide responses to the study’s interview questions and to promote dialogue between and among the researcher and youth. Photo-voice was selected for this study because of its accessible nature – both as a data collection tool and for dissemination and knowledge mobilization purposes, and for its ability to foster cultural practices of story-telling while embracing transformative and Indigenous ways of knowing (Castleden, Gavin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008). Data were collected over the course of one month in June of 2017.

Questions to participants included, a) What is your life like? b) What is good about your life? c) What makes you strong? d) What needs to change? and e) What should childhood look like? (adapted from Skovdal & Andreouli, 2011). During their free time, participants took photos around their school and community environments and returned to meet with the researcher at a convenient time to discuss them. These discussions took place individually, in pairs, or in small groups and were open-ended, allowing for a reflexive elaboration of each photo (Tracy, 2010).
Of the eleven participants, one participant opted to draw pictures rather than take photos to represent their ideas; another participant used a written rather than spoken narrative to account for their photos. The data collection process was thus adapted to respect the individual choices for expressing their views and to properly reflect the desires and capacity of the youth involved.

Each participant submitted one photo per question. Their perceptions were organized through the use of an audio-recording device along with a research diary. Photos selected by youth were displayed on a computer as they talked about each one. After discussing each photo, their statements were summarized to allow for confirmation and/or adjustments to be made by youth. Their confirmations ensured that the researcher understood that their expressed testimonies matched what they had intended to illustrate.

In keeping with the Indigenous culturally responsive method outlined previously, participants were contacted to review the thematic analysis to ensure that it was in line with what they intended to express. This method of member checking refers to the act of taking the data and interpretations back to participants so they can confirm and/or correct their narratives. (Creswell & Miller, 2000)

**Youth Views of their Community**

Four major themes emerged from the data: i) relationships, ii) health and well-being, iii) knowledge, and iv) the importance of community and culture. Each theme is presented below as it relates to the youth’s perspectives.

**Relationships**

Youth discussed their relationships with people (family and friends), animals (specifically their pet dogs), and the land. What became clear from the participants’ discussions was the comfort and joy they received from these relations resulting in a deep connection and responsibility to these relationships.

**Comfort** offered. In response to, “What makes you strong,” Harry quickly began drawing a picture of a boy and his friend (see Figure 1).
Harry shared the significance of the picture,

Well, it’s a little boy being sad until his friend came up to him and just cheered him up, and then he has a smile on his face because, a lot of people were there for me and then, when I’m sad, I just have, I just have to have someone who makes me feel happy and says, “It’ll be alright.”

This notion of comfort gained from relationships was a theme throughout the participants’ responses. Ashlynn and Kaylin spoke of the importance of their mothers. Zach explained that friendships make him strong “because you have someone to care for, and someone who cares about you.” Harry added that, “sometimes me and Zach don’t hang out that much but he’s still my friend, and I care about him, and I want to be there for him until we grow up and graduate, till we go different ways, and live our different lives.” (See Figure 2).
Findings demonstrate that youth used components of their relationship with nature as larger symbols of comfort and hope within their own lives. Kaylin submitted her photo to represent what was good about her life and explained that, “my life is all about sunsets. When it’s really sunny out, I see them all the time. It reminds me of home because I see it almost every day” (see Figure 3).

![Photo of sunsets](image)

*Figure 3. Kaylin’s photograph representing comfort from nature.*

Bree explained how rain makes her feel better by reminding her that even though there are tough times – or rainy days – “but then there is going to be a rainbow” and things will become easier. Emily, expressed how seeing the northern lights “dance” make her calm.

**Joy.** The ability of relationships to bring joy to the youth’s lives was evident through their sharing about their relationships. Ashlynn explained how her friendships make her life “colourful.” Shauntel discussed the role of friendships in her life, how she spends time with her friends every day, and that they “bring joy to [her] life” by making her laugh. Emily, Kaylin, and Kaydence spoke specifically about how their dogs make them feel happy, by playing with them, cheering them up, and simply being present with them.

Of the eleven participants, ten stressed the importance of children playing outside on the land and seven expressed the importance of staying away from technology during childhood. Figure 4 represents Kaydence’s views on childhood. She expressed that, “kids should start going out more, instead of staying inside and playing games. Children should go out and have some fun and do stuff like how children should do.”
Jazz echoed this sentiment by stating that he felt “childhood should be more like kids filled with crazy, adventurous imaginations, playing outside making memories, instead of staying indoors using technologies.” Kaylin additionally elaborated on this idea by stating, Childhood should look like playing outside, and swimming, and playing with your friends outside, and having fun but without technology. Children shouldn’t be playing with technology because technology can wait, and your friends they’re not always going to be there, so prioritize them over it.

**Connection and responsibility.** Many of the youth spoke about the importance of having a connection to others and the land and discussed the various ways that these connections are meaningful to them. Ashlynn, Harry, Shealynn, Kaydence, and Kaylin all highlighted the importance of family and the value family added to their lives – specifically in that they will always have a shared connection and bond. Shealynn highlighted this sentiment when speaking about sharing plans for the future with members of her family. She discussed how her family stated, “we won’t give up on you, and we won’t do anything to hurt you.” This sense of connection and safety was echoed by many participants, not only in terms of family members but also when speaking of friends, pets, and the land.

Bree shared her photo to represent what is good about her life (see Figure 5). Bree elaborated that friendship is important because, “we’re like all there together, like we’ve all got
each other.” “When you’re down, they’re like there for you… they’re there for you like whenever.”

![Figure 5. Bree’s photograph representing friendship and connection.](image)

This connection and constancy seemed to be of incredible importance and value to the youth. To have people to turn to, peers to confide in, and friends to unwind with were highly valuable characteristics within the lives of youth. When asked, “What is good about your life?,” four of the eleven youth shared photographs of their dogs and included rich descriptions of the importance of their pets in their lives.

Regarding nature specifically, the strong connection youth felt towards the land also developed their strong sense of responsibility for it. Faith shared her reflection on the impact of forest fires, pollution, the changing migration patterns of animals, and how it has affected their enjoyment of the woods. Additionally, Ashlynn spoke about the environment in response to what she believes needs to change. Ashlynn shared a picture of her property with an overcast sky to represent the concerning and changing weather patterns (see Figure 6).
Figure 6. Ashlynn’s photograph representing concerning weather patterns.

Ashlynn explained,

the weather needs to change, the environment, and the people that litter they need to start taking care of our world, because our soil and our air is getting polluted and we need to keep this community clean, safe, and good.

Similarly, Jazz shared his beliefs about the importance of respecting the land. He stressed that,

People think that waking up another day is a blessing, but what they don’t realize is that each day the land is dying and we’re all too busy to notice it. The land is what gives us life, it feeds us, it gives us water, but yet we treat it like it’s nothing.

Health and Well-Being

The youth spoke about the importance of physical health, having a reflexive awareness of their mental health, and their desire to obtain greater access to supports and services.

Physical health. Participants made references to physically healthy choices in a variety of areas. Shealynn spoke of the importance of her involvement in sports. In response to “What needs to change?” Zach and Jazz acknowledged the problem of addiction within their community. Interestingly, when responding to the question, “What needs to change?” a number of youth suggested that youth should spend less time on technology and more time outdoors in their environment. Shauntel included a photo of her friend smoking and explained that youth should not be smoking at a young age and that “they should really not be starting such bad habits.”

Mental health. Overwhelmingly, youth participants demonstrated self-awareness of their mental health by highlighting both positive and negative influences within their own lives as well as by offering solutions as to how to respond positively.
Positive influences. Emily shared that when she feels stressed, she often goes outside for a walk at night to view the northern lights and that they make her calm, “especially when they dance.” When asked, “What should childhood look like?”, Shauntel shared her photograph of a sunset, that to her symbolizes the importance of being grateful. She asserted, “you just have to enjoy what’s in front of you.” Jazz similarly demonstrated gratitude in his response to “What makes you strong” by expressing “happiness begins with your own attitude and how you look at the world. Live your dreams and take risks. Life is happening now” (See Figure 7).

Figure 7. Jazz’s photograph of a sunset representing gratitude.

Negative influences. Shealynn and Bree both recognized the possibility of specific friendships causing harm and the importance of knowing when to walk away from negative relationships. Shealynn commented that, “I have so much stuff to do and I don’t need people’s problems in my mind right now.” Bree remarked, “I had to change like some of my issues with my friends, because some of them are holding me down, and some of them aren’t. I had to keep going to see what I had to do to get to my goal.” Both participants demonstrate the recognition of negative influences and the self-awareness necessary to identify and correct the situation.

Additionally, Faith voiced her views regarding how education is making her attitude better by sharing that, “right now, I mean my attitude right now is very … bad… and reading, is kind of making it much better…Because books inspire people. It’s like really good.” Faith demonstrated her ability to recognize potential problems as they relate to her attitude while also demonstrating her aptitude to identify potential solutions.

Perseverance. A resounding concept that emerged from the data was the perseverance of youth. Bree reflected her views of perseverance through a photograph of a sunset. She shared
how the photograph acted as a metaphor for life – how the light parts of the sunset represent the good days, and the dark parts, the “shady days” (see Figure 8).

![Figure 8. Bree’s photograph of a sunset to represent perseverance.](image)

Bree expressed that it is important for her to use this metaphor of a sunset to represent her life, “because you’ve got to stick to life, whatever it throws at you. It’s going to be really hard, but you’ve got to like stick to the ground.”

**Access.** In addition to the youth’s awareness of issues affecting mental and physical health, they also recognized the lack of resources in their community. Specifically, they referred to the lack of access to mental and physical health supports and services. Bree spoke about the difficulty of finding supportive adults that can assist youth with their mental health struggles. She shared, “none of us can trust people like adults, because they’re like so judgmental and they’re not open-minded.” Emily expressed that the roads need to be repaired as they become obstacles in obtaining necessary health and emergency services (see Figure 9).

![Figure 9. Emily’s picture to represent lack of access to medical services.](image)
Knowledge

Many of the youth value the importance of learning and gaining knowledge. Interestingly, they spoke of learning as existing within two mutually exclusive categories: learning in class – consisting of the typical subjects taught in school, and learning about one’s own culture and language. Shealynn highlighted this tension between learning in class and learning about one’s own culture,

I used to speak Dené when I was small. When I got to kindergarten and stuff I started speaking English, and I’m losing my language and stuff… I was afraid to lose it when I was small, like 'do I have to go [to school]?' But I have to, because I want to go to Toronto and stuff.

Shealynn made clear her desire to be close to her language and culture while also recognizing the additional experiences and opportunities that come with speaking English and learning in school (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Shealynn’s photograph childhood before school.

Similarly, Faith was clear in her values about education. She expressed that “I need my education and learning other things like this [gestures to school building], but this [picture] is also about my culture too, my Dené culture too” (see figure 11).
The high school has a school Elder, two Dené teachers who teach language and culture components, numerous educational assistants who are fluent Dené speakers and frequent ‘culture days’ throughout the school year devoted to teaching about Dené culture while enjoying Dené cultural food, games, and activities. However, the youth in this study perceive cultural teaching and standard-curriculum teaching as two separate entities, which is an interesting finding and merits further examination.

**Community/Culture**

Findings indicate that the youth strongly value their community and culture. This was demonstrated through the expressed importance of preserving community history and culture and through the love and pride the youth expressed about their community.

**Preserving history/culture.** Shealynn spoke in length about the important role her Dené language and culture played in her life and expressed the importance of knowing her cultural history and sharing it with future generations. In response to “What is your life like?” Shealynn expressed that culture was important to her because,

- It’s our ancestors, like what my ancestors went through we can still teach others about.
- Like when new people are coming in we can teach them how to do it. I learned like, the
Red River Jig. I learned it as a kid. And at first, I was like, “what are they doing?”. But now when I hear the song, I’m like, “Oh my God, I did this when I was small!”

Shealynn’s desire to connect with her own history, community and future generations is further demonstrated as she discussed her future plans. Shealynn shared that when she is older, she will return to La Loche to see how the people and community have changed and to educate the younger generation on how their ancestors lived.

Likewise, Faith took a photo of the fireworks at Treaty Day to represent “What is your life like?” She explained that the photo makes her happy because it represents “the experiences that I have right now, and I’m probably going to have in the future” (see Figure 11).

Similarly, Jazz expressed the importance of a community’s history as a way of planning and looking forward. Jazz explained,

I think all of us want to feel something we’ve forgotten or turned our backs on, because maybe we didn’t realize how much we’re leaving behind. We need to remember what used to be good – if we don’t, we won’t even recognize it if it hits us right between the eyes.

This notion of remembering and connection to one’s history and culture was evident across all the themes.

**Community pride.** Findings indicate a strong sense of community pride. Ashlynn, Jazz, Kaydence, Zach, and Harry all shared values regarding investing in the community to make it a better place. Ashlynn discussed the necessity to care for the environment as a step in making La Loche “clean, safe, and good.” Jazz and Harry both spoke of the need for people to stop drinking and fighting. Zach offered the solution of bringing people together through the facilitation of activities that everyone could take part in and Jazz shared that he would like to see people being silly, laughing, and having fun. Harry expressed that he “was thinking of making a restaurant here for the community because, in this community, after that [school] shooting, after that tragedy, it felt a little sad, and I want to make this community happy again” (see Figure 12).
Interestingly, Harry did not attend the high school at the time of the shooting, but nonetheless demonstrated a love of his community by attempting to create a positive change within it. Through sharing his views, Harry demonstrates clearly the importance of including youth voices in matters that affect them as he clearly had observed and felt the consequences of the tragedy and offers meaningful solutions to affect change. Similarly, Jazz expressed how important La Loche is to him:

“La Loche isn’t as bad a place as people think it is. If you ever come around La Loche you are welcomed with respect, treated like you’re family, and you get to see smiles on people’s faces even if they’re having a bad day. La Loche in general is home to anyone…. I love La Loche.”

**Analysis**

The themes identified were not mutually exclusive and separate categories. They reflect what Absolon (2010) posits as an Indigenous cultural value known as “Indigenous wholism” (p. 75), the concept that we are all connected and must perceive each aspect in relation to the whole. For example, the theme of ‘relationships’ cannot be altogether separated from the concept of ‘health and well-being,’ nor can ‘knowledge’ be separated from ‘community and culture’. Figure 13 demonstrates how the themes are connected, where the largest circle is the representation of the whole and the smaller circles represent the themes that emerged through the analysis process.
The whole – represented by the large circle – acknowledges past, present, and future contexts (Absolon, 2010). Frequently, when youth shared their perceptions on their lives and their communities, they would shift between reminiscing about the past, connecting to the present while also projecting towards the future. There seemed to be a constant amalgamation and consideration of time and space, including reflections from their past and present, and thinking about future circumstances, signifying that these time periods are not separate but rather connected and mutually influencing (Blackstock, 2009).

The following section aims to elaborate on ideas and themes as identified by the participants and to situate their ideas within the broader literature.

**Relationships**

The importance youth placed on relationships with family, friends, and nature is overwhelmingly clear. It was surprising that animals and the youth’s surrounding environment shared the same category as that of human family members and/or friends. However, it was actually the lens of a colonized, adult-centric perspective that prevented the understanding that the youth had strong and important relationships with animals and nature. This speaks to the importance of offering space for the youth to express their views, facilitating the process for youth to express themselves, listening to them, and acting on their views (Lundy, 2007). To this end, it was imperative to double check participant narratives with each youth through member checking.
Participant’s views on relationships reflect a common Indigenous worldview that situates people as existing in a web of relations not limited to immediate and extended family but including their relationships with people, animals, and nature (Kirmayer, et al., 2003; Alfred & Corntasell, 2005). Youth spoke fondly of these relationships. They shared the joy and deep sense of kinship they received from their family members (e.g., parents, grandparents, siblings), their friends, their animals, and the land. Alfred and Corntasell (2005) position relationships at the core of Indigenous identity and explain that it is the need to maintain relationships that must guide all other “interactions and experiences with community, clans, families, individuals, homelands, plants, animals etc. in the Indigenous cultural ideal” (p. 609). The authors posit that if any element of identity becomes in danger of being lost, relationships – which are the cultural and spiritual foundations of Indigenous peoples – must be utilized to restore that part of the community (Corntassell, 2005). In this way, the role of relationships in the lives of community members cannot be overstated.

**Connection to nature.** The value of nature and the responsibility to preserve and care for it was a fundamental concern for youth. The expressed responsibility and importance of land connects with larger First Nations and Dené values that view themselves as relatives and protectors of nature (Adelson, 2000; Parlee, O’Neil, & Lutsel K’e Dené First Nation, 2007). Historically, the Dené peoples were a nomadic society that travelled with the various migration patterns of caribou and fish that they hunted and relied upon along with other resources from the boreal forest (Parlee et al., 2007; Holmes, Grimwood, King, & Lutsel K’e Dené First Nation, 2016). For Dené peoples, the sacredness of their vast landscape endures to this day as it continues to sustain caribou and moose as well as other land resources essential to contemporary subsistence and culturally specific modes of spirituality, identity, values, memory, and knowledge (Holmes et al., 2016). As such, they have lived in close harmony and dependency on and with the land (Parlee et al., 2007). In consideration of this point, it is not a surprising finding that participants reflected the importance of the land in their testimonies; however, it came through so frequently that it is must be clearly noted and understood as a tremendously valued relationship among youth.

**Limited technology.** Ten of the eleven youth participants shared their beliefs that childhood should be spent outdoors and seven of the eleven stated that it should be spent away from technology. This was particularly surprising given that youth in this community – like many
youth across the country – whose classrooms, home lives, and social lives are becoming rapidly inundated with various technological devices and who actively and regularly engage with technology themselves – should recognize the necessity and importance of having time away from it. This finding further demonstrates the importance of consulting with youth regarding their views before implementing policy, curriculum, or the introduction of new classroom tools (Mayall, 2002; Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015), while simultaneously noting the profound importance youth place on spending time outdoors.

**Health and well-being**

Health and well-being from an Indigenous standpoint is the balance between the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual realms and involves balance with others (family and community members) (Lavallée, 2009; RCAP, 1996; Parlee et al., 2007; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009). This was illustrated through youths’ representations of health – existing within the physical and mental realms as well as being interconnected to people, nature, and animals. This finding is important as it may not be recognized or reflected in traditional policy that is based on universalist values (Boyden, 2003). It is for this reason that normative constructions of positive outcomes and markers of health and well-being must be restructured to include traditional Indigenous approaches to healing, well-being and particular ways of knowing (Baskin, 2007).

In addition, youth acknowledged the lack of adequate infrastructure in their community to receive important physical and mental health supports and services. Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) states that Indigenous individuals have a right to access all social and health services (UN General Assembly, 2007). Similarly, Article 24 of the UNCRC states that no child should be deprived of their right to access health care services (UN General Assembly, 1989). Van Daalen-Smith however argues that First Nations children in Canada face disproportionate difficulties accessing health care, consequently resulting in higher risks for health problems (as cited in Bennett & Auger, 2013) and causing Indigenous children to trail the rest of Canada’s children on almost every measure of health and well-being (Macdonald & Wilson, 2013). This failure to uphold this basic human right can result in a more strenuous, less successful, and shorter life span for Indigenous children and youth in Canada (Macdonald & Wilson, 2013). Therefore, as recommended in the Truth and
Reconciliation Commission’s call to Action 18, it is imperative that these treaties be respected and that resources be provided to adequately and promptly address this issue.

**Knowledge**

Participants revealed their value of learning and gaining knowledge—both within and outside of the classroom, and specifically as it pertained to one’s own culture. Youth noted the benefits of each. They also spoke of the opportunities that come from succeeding and graduating from high school and the connection to family, ancestors, community, and culture that one can access through speaking their own language. However, when speaking about education, the youth frequently spoke about gaining knowledge as a dichotomy between what can be learned at school (academic success) and what can be learned about one’s own culture (cultural success). Though the school has made (and continues to make) attempts to incorporate cultural events and teachings into the lives of students, there lacks an accurate cohesion between Dené and Métis cultural values, identity, and knowledge and provincially decided curriculum expectations (Sterzuk, 2008; Ball, 2004). This separation of Dené and Métis culture and Euro-Western academic learning can result in a myriad of learning difficulties for youth as there exists a noticeable power imbalance between home and school cultures as well as what is deemed ‘successful’ (Hermes, 2007; Sterzuk, 2008). Shealynn shared that she worried when she began school that she might lose her Dené language and stated that she did not want to go to school but she knew she should because she wanted “to go to Toronto and stuff.” Shealynn shared her deep connection to language but also her belief that to her, ‘success’ means finishing school and moving away from the community. This reflects the cultural belief of mainstream society that one cannot be successful if they stay in their northern community, and that true success can be achieved in the south (Gilmore, 2016; Ball, 2004). This underlying power structure that exists within school settings and prioritizes one way of knowing over another can best be described as institutional racism and can result in lower levels of educational attainment among Indigenous students (Sterzuk, 2008).

New educational practices are necessary to best support the capacity-building goals of Indigenous children (Ball, 2004). This may mean training community members and native Dené speakers to become classroom teachers, trainers, and curriculum consultants, and should involve the whole community as much as possible in the conceptualization, delivery, and evaluation of programs and training (Ball, 2004).
For most students, genuine engagement in learning must include curriculum and classroom policies that are personally relevant and meaningful to students while simultaneously affirming of one’s own identity, culture and experiences (Ball, 2004; Sterzuk, 2008; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). It is therefore imperative that a participatory approach to learning is established, particularly with an anti-colonial agenda (Ball, 2004).

Furthermore, Article 30 of the UNCRC states that a child “shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language” (UN General Assembly, 1989, p. 9). This is similarly noted in Article 13 and 14 of the UNDRIP. Article 13 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems, and languages” (UN General Assembly, 2007, p. 5). Furthermore, Article 14 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (UN General Assembly, 2007, p. 5). Additionally, the TRC’s call to Action 10 requests that the government draft Aboriginal education legislation with full participation and consent of Aboriginal peoples to develop culturally appropriate curriculum (TRC, 2015). Though it is clear no child attending La Loche’s high school is being forcibly denied the use of their language or to practice their culture, the youth in this study made clear distinctions between their learning through formalized education and about their language and culture. For example, Faith used a photo of a pencil to illustrate the importance of her education in school and added that she also felt it was important to learn about her own culture. Additionally, Shealynn discussed her first school experiences and her awareness that she was becoming disconnected from her Dené culture and language. Thus, to actualize this right, efforts must be made to ensure proper experiences for youth to engage with their language and culture in their everyday lives and in their education.

**Community and culture**

Participants revealed a strong sense of community pride and desire to preserve their traditions, history, and culture. Youth demonstrated a great sense of ownership and responsibility to their community, and a desire to “make the community happy again” (Harry, personal
communication, 2017). This is an important finding as La Loche has become the recipient of a great deal of negative commentary by media outlets in recent years that frequently view the community through a deficit lens. The youth in this study did not speak of their community in contemptible terms. Rather, they identified themselves as having great autonomy, hope for the future, and pride in where they are from.

**Concluding Thoughts: Youth Participation in Research**

The youth participants in this study were highly capable of identifying issues of importance and relevance to their lives and environments. This aligns with the understanding of youth as having the skills necessary to proficiently assess their community’s strengths and weaknesses (Mayall, 2002; Weinger, 1998). It also demonstrates that children and youth are competent social actors who contribute to meaningful change in substantial ways (Skovdal & Andreouli, 2011). For these reasons, it is imperative that Indigenous youth and communities are genuinely consulted to determine what programs, services, and supports are most suitable for their community’s cultural context (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier & Peace, 2011).

Listening to their voices is simply the first step; hearing and responding is another (Lundy, 2007). King, Wattam, and Blackstock (2016) assert that it is important that all adults, including those who work in government, professionals who work with children and youth, legal parties, and adjudicators, facilitate the inclusion of young people within legal and administrative procedures that impact their lives. This is of particular importance for Indigenous children who have been historically and frequently marginalized and excluded from the processes and decisions that have had great impact on their everyday lives (King et al., 2016).

To truly affect change in this nation, Regan (2010) states that “we must begin where we are, not where we want to be, remembering that decolonization is a lifelong struggle filled with uncertainty and risk taking” (p. 218). They add that “[t]his demands that we challenge ourselves and others to think and feel and act with fierce courage and humble tenacity in the struggle to right our relationship” (p. 218). We are currently provided with a unique opportunity at this specific time in our nation’s history to do better than those who have come before us; to enter into meaningful and respectful relationships with Indigenous youth and communities, and to recognize the sovereignty, the profound wisdom and expertise, and the great capacity of
Indigenous youth and their communities to identify our nation’s next steps. It is the fervent responsibility of all others to respond.

References


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