Caught Between Two Worlds: the Voices of Youth from Four First Nations in Northern Ontario

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Introduction

Mamow Ki-ken-da-ma-win: Everyone Searching for Answers Together (Searching Together) is a partnership-based approach to identifying priorities and issues of importance in remote First Nations in Ontario. The collective goal of this partnership is to learn from one another in the context of northern First Nations lived realities. This community assessment and mobilization process serves as a vehicle for understanding and taking steps to address community wellness. The Searching Together's southern team is affiliated with faculty, staff and students at Ryerson University.

The voices of youth captured herein are from four fly-in communities in northern Ontario and were gathered between 2011 and 2015. Children and youth played a powerful role in shaping the Mamow Ki-ken-da-ma-win process. The conversations with youth were arranged to accommodate their space and time and were built on established, trusting relationships with the youth facilitators on the team. The youth spoke with candour and had valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities they faced while living in their communities. They were thoughtful about how to overcome obstacles that interfered with their wellbeing and they clearly expressed their wishes, hopes and dreams for the future.

The four key themes that resonated throughout the dialogues with these youth were inextricably connected: boredom, a sense of hopelessness, the importance of education and the revitalization of land, language and culture. Youths' interface with social media played a significant role in navigating these four themes in their lives. Their understanding of achievable solutions was linked to youth having an amplified voice, meaningful ways to participate in leadership and a safe space to commune with peers and to play.

Historical Context

The importance of recognizing the underlying "root causes" in any explanation of the situation or circumstances faced by First Nations in remote communities is fundamental. These underlying factors include first contact and colonialism which led to forced relocation and severance from traditional land. This created a dependency by Aboriginal peoples on outside sources for food and other goods. Furthermore, colonialism led to the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and communities to reside in residential schools where their traditional languages and culture were not supported, leading to the disintegration of traditions, language, and culture. Many of these children were subjected to severe neglect, as well as physical and sexual abuse, which had devastating effects. The impact of this trauma coupled with the forced erosion of culture and traditional lifestyle led to a psychological disconnection from family, community, and social networks. The predominant outcome as witnessed in the four communities discussed herein is the deterioration of community wellbeing. For example,

indigenous people are more likely to be poor and disadvantaged, to suffer from ill health or a lack of wellbeing, or to die young (Gracey & King, 2009). Cultural dislocation has also been linked to mental illness and other serious problems such as depression, substance abuse, violence, and suicide (Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2000). The cumulative effect of the multigenerational experience of colonization and the concomitant trauma and loss is embedded in the current social narrative and the overall health and wellbeing of the individuals and families in the four First Nations described herein.

Current Context for Aboriginal Children and Youth

This historical context laid the foundation for the current demographic profile of Aboriginal communities in Ontario. In Ontario for example, the annual income for an Aboriginal individual is \$12,000 lower than that for a non-Aboriginal individual. On reserve, up to 67% of households suffer from hunger (Stats Canada, 2008). Given the level of poverty, poor housing and hunger (Health Canada, 2007), it is not surprising that Aboriginal children lag seriously behind non-Aboriginal children in educational achievement on measures such as readiness to learn, progress in school and high school graduation rates (Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates (CCPCYA), 2010). These socioeconomic disparities are demonstrably linked to colonial processes and the resultant inequities in access to resources (Smylie, 2009). A significant outcome is that Aboriginal peoples have disproportionately more experience with challenges related to mental health. Untreated mental health concerns and feelings of hopelessness lead to suicide attempts and completed suicide (ibid). Suicide rates are five to seven times higher for Aboriginal youth than non-Aboriginal youth (Finlay & Nagy).

The connection between poverty and child welfare involvement is also well-documented. CCPCYA (2010) states that when deep intergenerational poverty persists, the default solution may become child welfare and the removal of children from their homes which accounts for the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal children in the system. Limited intervention or resources to restore family strength or unity and inadequate opportunities perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Finally, Aboriginal youth are over-represented in the youth criminal justice system. They make up one-quarter of all custodial admissions, yet these youth represent 5% of the total youth population (Statistics Canada, 2014). Social supports and improved education opportunities are required to decrease risk factors that propel youth into the justice system. Overall, the disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and youth are alarming (Auditor General, 2011). These disparities are directly linked to the remnants of colonialism which perpetuate social exclusion, loss of identity and a disconnection from traditions and culture.

Community Context

The four First Nations from which the views of youth were gathered are all small communities with populations, both on and off reserve, of between 390 and 2600 people. As fly-in communities, they are only accessible by plane, except for approximately six weeks (weather depending) during the winter months when winter ice roads are adequately frozen. These remote First Nations are between 400 and 600 kilometers north of Thunder Bay in the boreal forest area of northwestern Ontario. The four First Nations are signatory to either Treaty #9 or Treaty #5 and are affiliated with the Provincial Territorial Organization of Nishnawbe-Aski Nation. In terms of governance, Chief, Deputy Chief and Band Council members are elected by community/band members and provide leadership on all matters related to the First Nation. They serve a term of two years. The Elders provide daily support, advice and guidance to the Chief and Band Council and are important to the wellbeing of each community. Although the majority of people in each community speak English, Elders and many mature aged community members are fluent (spoken and written) in Ojibway or Oji-cree. The working language however, for the younger generation is English. Language revitalization programmes are underway in each community.

In each of the four First Nations, it is noted that the majority (approximately 60%) of community members are youth under the age of 29 and an average of 33% of the population of each community is under the age of 18. First Nations populations in Canada are younger than the

general population. Education is provided by local schools in each community. Kindergarten to grade 8 classes are provided in each school with teachers and educational assistants. Secondary education is currently only available to grade 9 in three communities and grades 9 and 10 in one community. Secondary education however, is provided through an internet programme with some on-site teaching support. Enrollment in community secondary school internet classes is reportedly poor with a low success rate. Students who wish to complete their high school education must leave the community and go to a school in a city such as Thunder Bay. First Nations report that of those students who leave the community to finish high school, 30 to 40% do not graduate (Finlay & Yellowhead).

Although there are a range of community-based recreational facilities such as an arena, community hall, school gymnasium, and a playground/sports field, there are limited organized activities for children and youth due to a lack of staffing and adequate equipment. Each community has a nursing station with a community health nurse(s) and a home and community care programme. Pregnancy and parenting programmes may also be available. Other services may include: a social welfare administrator, a child welfare officer, a family resource worker, a youth worker, an addictions counsellor, and a crisis prevention worker.

The Consideration of Rights for Youth in Remote First Nations

Youth are unequivocally declared an important, if not the most important, priority by the community leaders, the Elders and family and community members in all four First Nations. Children and youth are seen as “our future”. This statement implies that youth will be offered a voice and meaningful participation in the day to day life of their community and its development both in the present and the future and opportunities will be provided to encourage the fulfillment of their goals and aspirations.

- *“they (youth) are our greatest asset in the future”* Elder
- *“our youth is our future. We can’t step backwards ‘cause we need to move forward, helping our youth every way we can, just moving forward”* Community Member

If children and young people are to become constructive citizens in any context, four dimensions of citizenship need to be considered: rights and responsibilities; access to rights and responsibilities; voice and meaningful participation and a feeling of belonging to one's community and the identity that flows from that sense of belonging (Finlay, 2010).

Greenwood (2005) explains that "Aboriginal citizenship" values:

"the group over the individual and, therefore, models of kinship imply a distinct form of rights, whereby everyone has the right to give and receive according to their choices. From birth, Aboriginal children are placed firmly within this context of kinship, family, community and Nation. In this kinship context, they are taught to respect and respond to the needs of their kin and it is these teachings that are the beginnings of Aboriginal citizenship." (pp.554)

Cultural continuity is therefore an integral and significant component of citizenship. UNCRC Article 30 states that "due regard must be paid to not denying their rightto enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion and to use their own language" (pp. 553). Greenwood also calls attention to the fact that the right to cultural continuity is established by the Canadian Constitution which states that "First Nations children have a right to learn, maintain and preserve their respective language(s) and cultures" (pp. 553). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) obligate the protection of these fundamental rights and responsibilities. Cultural continuity as discussed earlier has been undermined through colonial practices. This emphasizes the importance of restoring language and culture as one path to revitalizing young people's sense of belonging and citizenship. This reverberates throughout the words of the youth from the four communities.

Article 12 in the UNCRC provides a framework for understanding how children and youth can access their rights. "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." It represents the right for children and youth to have a voice and participate when decisions are being made about them. The youth in the four communities frequently asked that they be enlisted as fully participating members of their community with voice and responsibility and regretted that this did not happen often enough.

- *"I have never heard any youth being asked on what they think"* Youth
- *"pay attention to youth. Listen to what they say"* Youth
- *"I think that the main thing for the community to concentrate on is youth. There's a lot of talk for the past five years about the youth, saying that we should speak up and all that but they don't really give us a chance to"* Youth

- *“youth don't give much feedback in their community..... what's needed here. Like I hear when they have Band meetings, like there's never any youth there to have a voice” Youth*
- *“I'd like to be a vocal speaker for youth. To go around and talk to people with power to bring stuff to our community“ Youth*
- *“well, at least get the youth to be more independent....and get involved in decision making and leadership in the community” Youth*
- *“I would probably be a good leader. I thought about it, being a leader one time but I figured I'd wait 'till I got a little bit older.....I gotta be old to do something for them to hear me. Got to wait until I'm older” Youth*

First Nations youth on reserve, like all youth in Canada, have rights through a variety of national and international charters, declarations and conventions as well as provincial and federal legislation. Access however, to those rights and entitlements is difficult if not impossible for the youth in the four communities. The impoverished circumstances in which they live denies them access to the most basic of rights such as adequate housing, clean drinking water, equitable health care services, food security, quality education, recreation and play (Finlay, Hardy, Morris & Nagy, 2010).

Nevertheless, the four dimensions of citizenship (rights, access to rights, voice and meaningful participation, belonging and identity) have profound meaning when considering the life circumstances and wellbeing of the youth in these four remote communities.

The Gathering of Voices

Honouring the voices of the youth and faithfully capturing their words was the primary intent of the two authors. As non-indigenous women, we were not walking in two worlds as were the youth participants of the Project. However, we were privileged to be welcomed and included in each community by the Chief and Band Council, the Elders, the children and youth, the service providers and family and community members. We both have made many visits to each community over the years in our journey of learning and relationship development. As non-indigenous people, we persistently gave deference to our indigenous partners of all ages. As so well illustrated by the authors of *Two-Eyed Seeing* and *the Language of Healing in Community-Based Research* (2009), we “listened” to the narratives of the youth. We “waited for” and followed the lead of the youth as they organized their own activities or programmes. Primarily,

we were simply brokers between the two worlds, inside and outside of the community. Our connection with these youth was sustained through the use of social media such as Face Book.

Permission for community members, which included youth to participate in the Mamow Ki-ken-da-ma-win: Searching Together process required a Band Council Resolution from each of the Chiefs and Band Council members in the four First Nations between 2011-14. Band Council Resolutions were revisited if an election took place and new Chiefs and Band Council members were elected while the Searching Together process was underway in the community. The Searching Together process required the development of trusting relationships between the people of the First Nation and the Searching Together team. Time and resources were invested in those relationships. This is consistent with the experience of others who partner with First Nations. (Castleden, Morgan & Lamb, 2012). Many trips by the searching together team to the community took place over a period of five years. Chiefs and community leaders were also invited to meet with team members on those occasions as well as at meetings in southern Ontario. When the focus was youth, teams were assembled which included youth facilitators trained as child and youth care practitioners. Furthermore, students from the Faculty of Community Services, Ryerson University, were invariably part of each team. The numbers of students travelling north for each visit varied according to the tasks or events to be undertaken by the team at the request of the community. Faculty members, research assistants and team leaders also contributed to the searching together process.

Multiple points of potential access to youth were needed by the youth facilitators, who routinely negotiated with the youth upon arrival in the community about how to access youth and how their views might be heard by the team. Youth were considered to be between the ages of 13 and 24 years. Youth facilitators spent considerable time with youth on each community visit to understand from their perspective what it was like to live in their community, their personal hopes and dreams and what they believed should be the priorities of the community. All interactions with youth were in their life space and most frequently initiated by youth themselves. Meetings with youth took place in schools, at community gatherings, in places in the community where youth congregated, in teacherages (where teachers lived during the school year) or at the “lodge” where the team resided.

Events, gatherings, and activities were often initiated by youth with the support and resources of the Searching Together team. Collaborative community-based events included an Art Festival that displayed the various art forms of the youth, Cultural Craft events, an Elder-

youth retreat, a Mother's Day celebration and a number of community feasts celebrating youth. Relationships between the youth and the youth facilitators were established over time while working together organizing the events or during ongoing interaction that was not event specific. These relationships were maintained through social media and telephone contact between team visits to the community.

Youth self-identified as youth leaders in their community or the Chief and the Band Council liaison identified community-based youth leaders to partner with the team. These youth leaders were given the responsibility of gathering the youth for events and assisting the youth facilitators in organizing events and activities in the community. These community-based youth leaders were paid by the Searching Together Project. On a number of occasions, youth and youth leaders came to Toronto to attend provincial events organized by the youth facilitators of the Searching Together Project. These events included a community-based Art Festival; Southern Youth in Motion events sponsored by Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win: North South Partnership for Children (2); Shaking the Movers children's rights workshops (4); Zines (magazines) developed by northern youth (3) and other youth-driven activities.

The more formal gathering of information and narratives from youth was always understood to be for the purpose of giving the youth the opportunity to have a voice, to offer messages to the leadership in their community, and to enlighten non-indigenous peoples about the circumstances of their life. Youth-friendly reports were written by and for the youth with the support of youth facilitators and other team members. Photography was an important component of each report as were the verbatim quotes from youth. The more formal gathering of information for their reports included multiple approaches but this paper is restricted to youth interviews and focus groups. The community-based youth leaders facilitated access to the youth, prepared the questions to be discussed and organized the venues. The Searching Together Project's youth facilitators generally led the discussion during the interviews or the focus groups with one facilitator taking verbatim notes as audio recording was typically not authorized by the youth. Interviews/focus groups generally took place late in the day, after school at a venue that accommodated the youth. The provision of meals was an important component because of food insecurity for youth and their families in remote communities. The format for the gathering of information or narratives was informal with a limited number of open-ended questions. The dialogue that ensued could be as short as an hour, last late into the night or span the time that the team was in the community. Problem-solving solutions to the challenges that the youth identified were often a component of the interchanges. Across the four communities over the five-year period of the project, a total of 122 interviews and nine focus groups (with 5 – 12 participants in each focus group) took place.

The alternative approaches used by the Searching Together team included concept mapping and the use of directed drawings by children and youth in school-based environments

and community-based photo voice initiatives. Although they illustrate the wealth of exchange between the communities and the Searching Together team, they have been excluded as less relevant than what the youth actually had to say. Gathering Canadian flag

Themes Arising from the Voices of Youth

The four themes that are explored in what follows have been selected because they are prevalent in the discussions with youth across all four First Nations. Each individual and group meeting with youth were transcribed by a member of the Searching Together team and the themes were determined from these transcriptions. These themes were also highlighted in the Youth Voices reports written for each community. Each theme is inextricably linked to the others. Collectively they reflect the impoverished conditions experienced by the youth in their community and the devastating impact these conditions and circumstances have on their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their friends, their kinship network, and those they hold close.

Nothing to do.....Nothing to like

- *“they (youth) get bored....like they don’t know what to do, they are wandering around, walking around the streets”* Youth
- *“nothing to do in this boring rez”* Youth

Boredom was identified by youth in the four communities as a major issue. Service providers and adult community members were also worried about the lack of opportunities and activities to engage youth and how that affected their wellbeing.

- *“my main concern is that kids don’t really have much to do, especially teenagers.... I think that really causes lots of issues and making them restless, depressed and.....making wrong choices because there is nowhere to go, nothing to do”* Teacher
- *“the youth are bored. They need somewhere to go. Like my son here has nothing to do at nights”* Community Member

Another factor contributing to the boredom identified by youth was the lack of adequate housing. The shortage of housing or the poor living conditions made it intolerable for youth to stay at home. Often several families, and several generations were living together in a single-family dwelling with the youth lacking privacy or personal space. Family members would have to sleep in shifts with youth staying out late at night to accommodate these sleeping arrangements. This overcrowding causes stress, frustration and health concerns. Both youth and adult community members identified that housing was one of the biggest struggles facing youth in the community. The impoverished conditions were often experienced as devaluing them as a people.

- *"I am hoping that there will be better houses.....a bunch of these houses around here are pretty much not good to live in.....cracks on the walls, air drafts, flooding in the basements, those kinda stuff. Mould too. That's one big cause here"* Youth
- *"I just want my own privacy, my own stuff to look after and stuff like that"* Youth
- *"we need more housing for our youths. Like my family, there are three families living in my home. I want to see more houses"* Youth
- *"I know a lot of people are living with at least three or four families in one house, maybe a 3-bedroom house or a 4-bedroom house. My friendand her sisters they live with their parents and her sisters. They all have at least three or four kids"* Community Member

The boredom that youth experience in their community can sometimes lead them to "getting into trouble" such as the use of drugs and alcohol, the setting of fires, or fighting.

- *"youth need to be active, 'cause once we stop, they fall through the cracks of alcoholism, drug abuse, physical, mental spiritual and emotional abuse"* Youth
- *"that's (boredom) probably one of the major issues with the youth. In the summertime there were a couple of house fires because of them, shack fires. I think it was just out of boredom and who they hang around with"* Youth
- *"well most of all, it's alcohol and drug abuse here. Probably having nothing to do most of the time...that's why some of the youthgo running after those things"* Youth

However, the most troubling outcome described by youth related to boredom was thoughts of suicide.

- *“there’s nothing much to do here, you can’t wait to be an old guy and get the f.... out of here. I wouldn’t want to leave here but some people do, most people do. If they don’t leave they’ll kill themselves, it’s kinda crazy. When youth have nothing to do, don’t know where to go, sometimes they have no one to talk to” Youth*
- *“one problem is the lack of activities here, some of them feel bored and they feel isolated. Some of them leave, some of them hurt themselves. They don’t want to live sometimes because of boredom. Boredom gets them....that’s how they react sometimes, they try to kill themselves” Youth*

I Got No More Dreams

Many youth who participated in the interviews and the focus groups described themselves as “forgotten” and felt isolated and alone while living in their community. They lost sight of their purpose in their family and community and felt they “didn’t belong anywhere”. The impoverished conditions, food insecurity, lack of clean drinking water, limited health and mental health resources, limited youth engagement and recreational activities and high unemployment contributed to a sense of hopelessness. Parents, Elders and other Band members empathized with the youth. They understood the root of their despair but were fearful of the choices that the youth might be contemplating to alleviate the pain they were feeling. The following are the words of the youth struggling to find a sense of belonging and identity and the adults who witness this struggle among their community’s youth.

Forgotten and Longing to Belong

- *“the youth are forgotten; in terms of their participation.....we don't have anything for them. You know, there's a token game here and there but nothing”* Elder
- *“most of the time if there is nothing for them to do they lose hope. That's where the sad story is. Who do they blame? They blame Chief and Band Council for forgetting the youth over and over again”* Youth
- *“I did it all. Everything here as a kid though, so I know what a kid thinks...I know what they want to do. They want to be accepted. They want to belong somewhere”* Youth
- *“I don't feel like I belong anywhere....I feel like I have no family at all. I don't know why I am here. I guess just for the youth. Somebody needs to step up, somebody needs to do something”* Youth
- *“I think that what our youth need is to know their identity. It's very important that they know....every person has a purpose in this world. I think that's why some of them turn to drugs and alcohol, 'cause they're lost, they have no guidance and that guidance they need”* Adult
- *“I don't really think that youth contribute anything...just 'cause how it is sometimes, how it gets....the bad comes around you know? Everyone causing it and stuff like thatso I don't really think that they contribute anything”* Youth

Hopelessness

- *“I got no more dreams. I had a dream when I was young....but I have no more dreams. I don't know....I look at it as goals, not dreams. 'cause dreams never come true. My dreams at least, don't know about yours”* Youth
- *“I guess (youth) take it day by day probably...they just don't care about the future...or what's going to happen I guess. That's what I think anyways”* Youth
- *“I thought that it would be better by now... 'cause when I was younger...I am 22 now...when I was 12 years old, still the same thing. Still the same....nothing really changed around here”* Youth
- *“the way it is now, they feel hopeless. They probably think, 'I'll never get a house. What's the use of growing up?' That's the feeling they probably have now. 'I'll never get a job'.....Those are some of the things I hear the youth talk about”* Adult

Suicide

The youth in the four communities discussed suicide candidly either directly, based on a recent suicide event, or indirectly by depicting suicide as a consequence of “boredom”, “hopelessness” and “a way of handling the pain”, “a way out” and “an escape”. All

explanations were related to a sense of belonging and identity that was missing or aspirations that seemed no longer achievable. Youth longed for the collective strength and community leadership that would provide the support, guidance and scaffolding that they needed to understand and survive the dire poverty they experienced day to day and also the inspiration they needed in order to have hope for the future. Below are quotes from youth and an adult about the suicides in their community.

- *“the last 4 suicides we had in the community, there’s a reason why it’s happening. It’s the youth. There’s no support. No foundation. There’s no hope. They need to be provided with some sort of support or guidance that’s going to allow them to continue to aspire to what they want to be. And most of our youth don’t have that. They lose hope, especially in a small community like this. You lose a lot of that”* Adult
- *“I’ve been through a lot growing up with suicides and all”* Youth
- *“some of them do drugs; they can’t handle the pain sometimes. Some of them feel neglected and nobody cares. Some feel bored...they need to get out. Some have problems from way back, like being.....abused. They feel rotten inside, they can’t get it out. I don’t want that next generation, the youth, I don’t want them to go through that. I don’t want them to kill themselves. It needs to stop”* Youth

Overall in Canada, suicide rates are approximately 3 – 36 times higher amongst Aboriginal people than amongst non-Aboriginal people (Imrie, 2008; Harder, Rash, Holyk, Jovel & Harder, 2012) with the highest prevalence being among young people. Studies specific to suicide amongst youth in Aboriginal communities, and particularly to remote communities in northern Ontario, are rare. The few studies that exist suggest that clusters of suicide (three or more occurring within close proximity to each other) are related to a number of factors, including the presence of depression. Other contributing risk factors include recent losses, previous suicide attempts, and substance abuse. Contagion and the severe emotional response to the suicide of others in a community may also be risk factors. These were all features discussed by youth in the four remote First Nations.

Due to the small size of these communities, each suicide affects every community member. Everyone knows everyone else. Indeed, those intervening in a mental health capacity could in fact be intervening with a family member, a neighbour, or a friend. At this level, community members report high levels of unresolved grief due to the personal nature and number of suicides that have occurred, and possibly due to their own historical trauma. Some community members also indicated that there was no time to grieve after a death and no support; people have great difficulty talking about their losses. Without support and intervention into the effects of the stress and trauma in their life, youth suffer from the resultant sense of hopelessness.

Many communities in northern Ontario, struggle with drug and alcohol-related issues amongst their community members, and often amongst the youth as described by the youth. Although drug and/or alcohol abuse is a risk factor for suicide that needs to be addressed, this is another “risk behaviour” that is most often studied from an individual perspective – yet it cannot be understood in a vacuum without the social context of history and its outcomes (King, Smith & Gracey, 2009). It is argued that social factors are the most important determinants of such problems: when people become dislocated from their families and from their cultures, they often “give themselves over” to a substance or a thing (such as drugs, alcohol, gambling or the internet) to survive the pain of their existence (Alexander, 2010).

Chandler and Lalonde's research (2008) suggests that having a sense of culture and heritage buffers the pathway to suicide by youth. Cultural retention or revitalization through engagement with Elders and cultural leaders also serves to offer meaning and purpose in the lives of youth (Harder et al., 2012). Of significance to culture are: land claim settlements, self-government, schooling their own children, providing their own health services, preserving ties to the past, high community social networks and enhanced adult/youth relationships. (Chandler & Proulx, 2006; see also Kirmayer et al., 2009). Indeed Chandler and Proulx demonstrated that amongst First Nations in British Columbia, the rate of youth suicide varies dramatically between communities: 90% of the suicides occur in 10% of the bands, and thus those communities experience suicide rates 800 times higher than that of the rest of Canada. Yet, over 50% of the First Nations in B.C. have had no suicides in 15 years (Chandler & Lalonde 2004). It is important therefore to consider how these social-cultural factors, in addition to deprivation related to poverty, might contribute to the rate of suicide in the four First Nations discussed in this paper (Czyzewski, (2011).

Finally, the Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (2010) reports that “you have to know where you are coming from to know where you are going”. This statement emphasizes the importance of family heritage, culture and tradition, in the definition of identity. This is absolutely consistent with the themes throughout this paper. First Nations youth living on reserve indicated not knowing their family history had a huge impact on their identity (Finlay & Pearson, 2010). Often when the collective identity is devalued, individual identity is diminished. Lack of meaningful participation by youth in mental health programmes also contributed to this negative sense of self (Kirmayer, L., Simpson, C. & Cargo, M., 2003).

It is important to examine the supports required by those communities who struggle to cope with a high rate of youth suicide, in order to develop effective plans to ameliorate it

(Chandler & Lalonde, 2004; Finlay et al., 2010). The revitalization of the land, the language and the culture is underway in all four communities. Furthermore, youth understood the need for personal healing and were passionate when they talked about how their healing journey would unfold.

- *“first it would have to be...getting the youth together to heal as one. That’s been hard lately because of the tragic events the past four years. Every time we start feeling better, there’s always something that goes wrong”* Youth
- *“I think healing has to start with yourself, that healing has to start from you, otherwise you are going inside out...backwards. You have to start with yourself then go out. Like a flower....like a seed. If you plant a seed within yourself and you water it by helping yourself, it blossoms and people will recognize it”* Youth

Services for youth who need assistance with mental health or addiction issues and even crises are limited in the four First Nations. This has contributed to a deeper sense of hopelessness and with some youth, it has curtailed their “dreams”. Without effective supports, many young people may choose to walk the same path as their lost loved ones, and the cycle of suicide continues. Young people begin to view suicide as a viable alternative to a hopeless life style.

Education

Let’s educate our youth

- *“ maybe education, like we need people that we could utilize in the future when all these things that we are trying to implement are put in place. Let’s educate our youth, you know, educate our youth, then bring them back and utilize them, for kind of what we want to see as leaders. You know when we talk about capacity building”* Chief
- *“my goals are just to get my education, have my GED....so I can continue on in life....if I have all of my education and stuff like that, I think that I would come back and help out the community”* Youth
- *“well at least get the youth to be more independent and involved in decision making; to get involved in decision making and leadership in the community. To have more effective leadership in the community. To have effective leaders and role models and most importantly, education”* Youth

- *"I want to finish school andgo to college, make a career out of what I do"*
Youth
- *"education can get you anywhere in life, wherever that person desires to go in his or her own life. Education is a big role in the community now"* Youth

All of the youth, Elders, leaders and community members in the four First Nations saw the importance of education as one of the strongest determinants of health and wellbeing in their communities. When asked about their hopes and dreams, the majority of youth said that they would like to get their education and be able to get a job.

Being behind

In 2010, elementary students in the four First Nations were approximately three years behind other Ontario students on standardized tests (Finlay & Yellowhead, 2014).

- *"when I was in Grade 5 we (family) went to a white town and I tried to do Grade 5 work there.....I didn't know what was going on because I was behind like one or two years"* Youth
- *"I don't like the two grade gap that they have. I don't like school being closed all the time; I want the children to learn. They need to learn because the government is changing everything and they need to be educated, they need to be smarter than us"*
Youth/Father
- *"when I was going to school here (in the community), I didn't learn anything....When I went to high school, they said, 'write a newsletter', and I said, 'What? How do I?'it's how I went to school. Just played. That's it"* Youth

Today the success rates of First Nations learners in the Canadian education system are significantly lower than those of non-Aboriginal learners (Finlay & Yellowhead, 2014). Literacy and numeracy achievement rates, school retention rates, secondary school graduation rates, and postsecondary graduation rates are at unacceptably low levels in Canada. Over 60% of First Nations do not finish high school. In 2006, 43.7% percent of Aboriginal people did not have any certificate, diploma, or degree compared to 23.1% of other Canadians (Aboriginal Communities in Profile, 2010).

In Canada, the federal government funds education for First Nations students. Numerous studies have found that education for First Nations on-reserve has been chronically underfunded compared to provincial schools (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2011). Aboriginal children receive \$2,000.00 - \$3,000.00 less in funding per student per year than non-Aboriginal children (ibid). There is also a shortfall in funds for infrastructure costs especially on-reserve. There is little money available in the four First Nations for special education, libraries, computers, languages, school supplies, curriculum development and extracurricular activities. (A Canada Fit for Children, 2015).

Interrupting the Circle of Life

The youth of the four First Nations, like youth everywhere, are at a pivotal and transformative place in the circle of life. There are various terms that people may use for this stage such as “a coming of age” or a “time of wondering and wandering”. It is at this time that responsibilities typically increase and youth begin to decide how they wish to live their lives. For many Canadian youth, much of this time of life is spent in high school where, through an introduction to various experiences and subjects, identities and interests may form and develop. This direction may be shaped with the guidance of teachers, parents, and other members of one’s community. In the four communities in this study, the school only provides education up to grade nine. After completing grade nine, if students wish to continue their education, they need to attend a high school outside the community. Most of these students go to Thunder Bay where they are placed with a billet family. Having to obtain education outside the community leaves

these students bereft of familiar guidance during these very formative years. Leaving their community for school is challenging for the youth in terms of loneliness and isolation, peer pressures around education, and the inability to access support from their community toward achieving their educational goals. Leaving the community at this pivotal stage interrupts the Circle of Life in a negative way.

- *“it was scary at first. Like, I didn't want to go but I had no choice, well, it felt like I had no choice because there was nothing here. So I had a choice of going to Thunder Bay but me and one of my friends decided to try applying to Sault Ste. Marie because we heard there were a few other people from our class going so we got accepted so we just went. Just wanted to go somewhere different I guess cause there was like a lot of...I noticed like before like all the students who went to Thunder Bay they always came home and they dropped out and stuff like that so I wanted to try going somewhere different. I wanted something different. I didn't want to go to Thunder Bay because everyone else was going there.....like I was all scared to go into this big high school with all these other students...that's what I kind of felt scared of..... It just got really lonely because we were like so far away” Youth*

The decision to leave their community to go to high school is a difficult one for both youth and their families. Parents generally cannot afford to go with their children to Thunder Bay. This means that youth leave their community alone at 13 or 14 years of age.

Boarding

- *“it's very different when you feel you're visiting somebody's home and you're invading. That's how I felt when I went to high school, even though it was my cousin who was the boarding parent, because I didn't really know her” Youth*

- *“he (my son) used to be fine there with his grandma but his grandma is here now. But then he had to go to another boarding home....I feel safe when he is with family”* Parent
- *“it’s very hard for them and sometimes they just don’t adjust to the boarding homes”* Parent

There’s something missing, eh?

- *“that’s how I find my daughters when they went to high school. we’re apart, there’s something missing eh? You’re not that close to them after they leavethey go over there and when they come back, they don’t know me”* Parent
- *“it was hard, they were only 13 years old when they left. I was having a hard time because we lost that bond there”* Parent

Dropping out

- *“I went to Thunder Bay for about three months, I guess. Roughly three monthsit was tough...it was tough. I wanted to come home, I was homesick. I didn’t like it”* Youth
- *“lonely.....I only lasted one semester; ’cause I was...it was always just me. I tried making friends but didn’t have any”* Youth
- *“when my daughter was here, she went to high school with everybody; there was probably about 10 of them. Then by the third or fourth week they were coming back”* Parent
- *“they come home, the ones that go to high school. They come home within a month. I think something has to be done”* Youth

Youth and parents talked about youth being exposed to alcohol and drugs in the city. The youth are sent back to the community from school due to drug and alcohol use.

- *“loneliness. I think they see it everywhere that like, when they go down there, they think they can just have fun and just drink and stuff right? You know, like maybe they’re so lonely they wanna fit in or they just try to numb that pain you know, like, I know a lot of my cousins are being sent home because they were drinking you know and I ask them, “Why were you drinking? You were there for school!” And they were like, “I didn’t know what else to do” you know, their school is too, they didn’t like it. You know all those kids there are like hurting kids, right. Maybe we should just keep them there and support them if that’s possible“* Youth
- *“I was 15 I think when I was suspended for a whole year....I just didn’t want to go back after I got suspended. I guess I just got so used to just staying at home*

and doing nothing....just hanging around at night and getting into trouble”
Youth

Youth shared stories of being badly treated while residing in the city and feared violence and racism.

- *“I had to learn to be by myself and learn about education. For me, we stay in groups. We don't go out alone ourselves. The first month was rough; a friend was getting beat up. We decided after that we need to get in groups”* Youth
- *“when I want to buy something, they are rude sometimes. Or when I was just standing there, they look at you like you are going to rob something....I don't like how those racist people treat me.... a few times I almost got run over in Thunder Bay just because of the colour of my skin. I was trying to cross the road and they just kept driving fast”* Youth
- *“I sent him out in September (my son) and he came back the second week of October. Because he got jumped by these two white guys getting off the bus. So a couple of days later, I brought him home”* Parent

Youth dropped out of high school in a city unfamiliar to them feeling unsafe, isolated and alone. Access to alcohol and drugs exacerbated their vulnerability. Violence and racism directed at them or their peers reinforced their tenuous sense of belonging and identity. A return to the community was also fraught with challenges as described earlier, such as extremely impoverished living conditions, lack of employment opportunities, lack of housing, boredom, and a recurrent sense of hopelessness.

Internet learning

In each community there was the opportunity for an internet high school programme in which students could complete assignments and school work over the internet. In a school they can access a teaching assistant and one teacher as well as other teachers living in different communities throughout Ontario. There is a full programme for grades 9 and 10 and some courses for grades 11 and 12. Youth find the lack of structure and hands-on instruction from teachers difficult. The graduation rates from this program is low. The comment below represents the perspective of many students across the four communities.

- *“I don't like the online thing for me.it's like when I stare at a screen for a long time....I'm just not into it, so I'd rather do hands-on work. Like for example, if you show me what to do, then I will do it, just like that. But if I read it, I can't, I just don't process that well”* Youth

Nothing to do here on the reserve

One of the primary concerns of youth, echoed by band members, is the lack of jobs in each community. Jobs that are available are seasonal or they require training and education that is not available in the community or they are reserved for older community members. The unemployment rate is approximately 60% in each community and social assistance for most families is the sole source of income. If youth are successful in school, they have no jobs to return to in their community.

- *“by grade four I don’t need to learn. I am just going to be on welfare”*
Youth
- *“when our children finish high school there’s nothing for them when they come back home. There’s no work. I’m discouraged about that for our young people. There are a lot of young people that have finished high school but they have no other training....They should be [trained] so they are ready to do some kind of work. I think the government should be looking after these young people. Once they finish high school they should have something to do here at the reserve”*
Parent

In summary, the alternatives for youth in the four communities are bleak. Leaving the community to receive a high school education at age 13 or 14 is not a viable option for many youth due to concerns for their safety and wellbeing. They are also disadvantaged by the disparity in the level of education with which they were entering high school in the city compared to the other students not from remote First Nations. If they stay or return to their community, their secondary level education is limited to internet high school which youth feel is inadequate for their needs. Lack of jobs and employment opportunities further restrict their ability to advance economically. Youth acknowledged that their dreams and aspirations were largely dependent on receiving an education.

Caught between Two Worlds

- *“the youth, they’re just in the middle of something, like they don’t know...their way of life and [they’re] trying to know about the outside...They’re stuck in the middle ‘cause they can’t go forward [and] they don’t know how to survive maybe when they go in the bush”* Band Member

The Revitalization of their Land, Language and Culture

There is a dichotomy in each community's views about education. This polarization is around traditional knowledge versus academic knowledge and is perhaps one of the reasons behind the challenges in continuing and completing high school. Many elderly people in the community are concerned about the lack of traditional teachings available regarding how to hunt, live in the bush and speak and comprehend the Ojibwa language. For those who believe in the importance of this traditional teaching and who have the resources and the knowledge to do so, they go with their families out on the land to their trap lines to help them learn their traditional ways. A conflict arises because the time spent out on the land invariably takes away from time in the classroom and affects the progress of the youth through the school curriculum.

- *“it's like taking away my kids, those white people. That's what I felt. She has to do it, hey. That's how it is now, these days. Those Native kids, they have to go...out in the white-land actually. And when they come back, they don't know what they're doing. That's what I noticed. She doesn't want to cook fish, or I used to train them to go out on the land, she doesn't want to go camping with us anymore. She was about ten, eleven-some years old. She used to, they used to love that. They used to love going camping, so I have to re-train her again, and again. That's what it is now these days. They're lost when they come back. They don't know what to do”* Community member

Youth, community members, teachers and staff at the schools in the four First Nations spoke about the disconnect between the lived experience of students and the curriculum being offered at the community schools. This lack of integration of community and family values and lifestyle with the core curriculum offered in education settings resulted in a lack of motivation for students to participate in school programmes and consequently poor outcomes for students.

- *“they don’t value educational knowledge: They don’t know why they are going to school”*
Staff member at the Education Centre
- *“they don’t have real life experience to what we are trying to teach them....so it kind of makes it hard for them to engage in it....”* Teacher

Community members were asked in each community about the importance of retaining and revitalizing language and culture. The vast majority of parents, Elders, community members and band council members from each of the four First Nations believe that it was very important that their children learn about traditional culture and learn the Ojibwa language. The integration of this knowledge into the school curriculum was a way to make “learning” relevant to the students. Youth also gave many reasons why retaining the language and culture was important to them:

“so that we can communicate with Elders”

“because we need to keep our language alive as much as we can”

“because I’m Native”

“it’s important to our culture”

“because I wanna learn more Native stuff”

Historically, traditional culture and practices in these First Nations meant that children and youth were cared for by families, extended families and community. Extended family networks contributed to the day to day functioning of family life, the education of the children and youth and the teaching of indigenous ways of knowing which supported an understanding of culture and identity (Finlay & Pearson, 2010). Regardless of the impact of colonialism and the imposition of western practices and curriculum, the four First Nations continue to rely on family networks (grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins, Elders) to be the primary source of support and modelling for children and youth.

- *“cause I find that it’s better, they learn more when they’re around family, you know, people that care, actually care for them, not just send them out on their way and try to...live and learn on their own...education is key too”*
Community member

As discussed earlier, families and community members reiterated consistently the value of education for their children but reinforce the need for this education to be in the context of traditional values and lifestyle. This dialogue emphasizes the need for a bridge between western driven curriculum and ties to traditional land, language and culture. The youth spoke clearly to the Searching Together team of the importance to them of embracing the two worlds – of revitalizing language and culture and facilitating meaningful connection to the non-indigenous world.

Education as the Bridge

First Nations have long advocated that First Nations control over education is essential to improving educational success and community wellbeing. Studies have found that First Nations that have control over cultural factors like education have higher levels of well-being, including lower suicide rates (Auditor General's report, 2011; Finlay & Yellowhead, 2014). This is partly because of the holistic nature of First Nations education, which emphasize relationships, individual responsibility, and collective harmony and also involves the four quadrants of learning: emotional, physical, spiritual and mental (Battiste, M 2013). Furthermore, the First Nations lifelong learning model includes early childhood education, elementary and secondary school education, post-secondary education, vocational training, and adult learning. Traditional approaches to First Nations learning also tend to focus on nurturing learners in holistic and culturally appropriate learning environments that meet individual and collective needs. The First Nations approach to education provides a strong foundation for empowering First Nations peoples to contribute to the development of their families, communities, and nations (Finlay & Yellowhead, 2014).

With this approach to education, it could indeed be the bridge between the "two worlds". However, this necessitates the availability of an alternative approach to school located in the First Nation that incorporates elements of western curriculum within a learning environment that is culturally regenerative and relevant. It would also demand responsive pedagogies that improve outcomes for students. These schools would not only become the bridge between western curriculum which promotes academic advancement and traditional "learning" practices that empower indigenous identity but could serve as a "hub" in each community to address boredom, lack of belonging, hopelessness and suicide. This community "hub" would also offer a meaningful remedy to youth leaving their community during a pivotal transition in the circle of life.

Taking Youth Seriously

Youth, uniformly across all four First Nations reinforced the importance of completing high school. They spoke of dreams of pursuing careers, developing a trade or learning skills that they could bring to their community. They wished that there were more opportunities to fulfill those dreams. Youth anticipated the creation of a local high school because of the extreme challenges they faced leaving their community.

- “*yeah if youth in (First Nation) get educated, they’ll be here instead other people doing things for us in the community....like an electrician*” Youth
- “*I want to make all the youthgo to school and do whatever they want, like get their own life*” Youth

At the same time, youth pointed out the significance of maintaining their traditions and language which gives them a sense of identity and belonging. They feared that they had already lost their language and were unable to converse with Elders. They expressed interest in learning their traditional language and teachings from the Elders. Youth were aligned with the idea of education providing a bridge between western and indigenous knowledge. Some youth identified the community school as a place for this to take place.

- “*I barely know my own language and would like to learn more.....because I’m Native*” Youth
- “*it is important, that’s what I was taught, that we need to stick to our traditional ways, where we come from*” Youth
- “*my late grandfather made a camp...and he would take me there, every spring and summer...I guess it means so much to me that I want to keep those camps...for the future, if I have kids....I just want to keep the legacy alive*” Youth
- “*it would be best for them to learn their language.... it would be nice for them to learn what their own language is in school and teachers speaking it to themI would like them to teach them how to speak ‘cause mostly they are learning how to speak English*” Youth

The four First Nations identified greater accessibility to and communication with others outside of their community as a priority for their community in order to reduce isolation and increase accessibility to resources and services. This would include education, health care, mental health, economic development, administrative and training resources. It was the youth who were the strongest advocates for easier access to others outside of the community. Youth in these four communities are actively and knowingly straddling the “two worlds”. Through social media, they are enthusiastically linking with the non-indigenous, western world (Kral, 2011).

Through these communication technologies, they are learning new ways of expressing themselves, exploring their cultural identity and offering insights into their lives to others in and outside of their community. They fluidly express themselves through various mediums such as writing, visual arts, poetry, dance and music. All creative expression is by youth, in their own format, forum and platform, and reflects their own individual lived experience and circumstances (Kral 2011). Youth use social media and the internet to learn and improve their skills in the different areas of artistic expression. However, it appeared that youth more frequently illustrated the challenges they faced and their hopes and dreams through music. YouTube was the primary platform for this expression. It allowed youth to connect non-intrusively with their community peers and reach out to the world beyond for acknowledgement and encouragement.

- “ *if it wasn't for my music, I don't think I would be here*” Youth
- “ *the youth want to be heard. And people can be heard through the mic. Probably 60% of the kids from here want to play music*” Youth

This demonstrates that youth in these four First Nations, often by default are finding their own solutions. They have articulated very clearly the impact of boredom, hopelessness, losing their dreams and not belonging on their well-being. They have spoken about the devastating outcomes of prematurely leaving their family and community to attend high school. Youth also understood that staying in their community meant forfeiting their dream of having a career, escaping poverty and contributing to their community in a meaningful way. In response, youth echoed the necessity of accessing a range of education and training opportunities within their community using a culturally appropriate lifelong learning model (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Finlay & Yellowhead, 2014). While awaiting this to be put in place by governments and community leaders, youth continue to bridge the two worlds through their creative expression by means of internet and social media. They ask poignantly for the community members of their First Nation

to offer them voice, meaningful participation and a sense of belonging in their First Nation as they navigate the larger community.

One of the most concrete solutions voiced by the youth across all four First Nations was a community Youth Centre as a “safe place to hang out in the evenings”.

- *“we need something to do, a place to socialize, to rid of boredom, a place to learn skills and educate youth, to get to know each other, a place to be youth”*
Youth

A second strategy was a Youth Council to voice concerns of youth, collaborate with youth workers to create programmes for youth, and participate in community decision making.

- *“(First Nation) needs a youth council so the youth don’t feel alone, so they don’t need to be alone and left out”* Youth
- *“youth will feel motivated and they will notice change and they will notice people listening to them”* Youth

Finally, youth asked for mentors or role models to look up to, to educate, to guide and to help youth “grow up learning to look up to yourself”. They felt that “there wasn’t enough influences or role models” available to them.

- *“I think the youth need a little motivation. A role model to look up to, someone that can talk to the youth about things, such things as drugs and alcohol and also education”* Youth

Youth in all four First Nations understood the dilemmas and challenges they faced each day and believed that they were the leaders of the future and needed the tools to “know how to move the community forward” in order to address these circumstances. They felt that the youth needed to be taken seriously.

- *“we have leaders now, right? And then there’s kids in the next generations and then if...nobody stands up or tries to make a difference, you know, nobody’s gonna move. Everybody’s gonna be stuck in one place. And all you have is these old people. They will try to change, you know, try, try, try. And they keep doing that for years. But nobody’s gonna be there to lead the community to change”*
Youth

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