

YOUTH'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN  
ENVISIONING COMMUNITY CHANGE

by

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## ABSTRACT

### YOUTH'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN ENVISIONING COMMUNITY CHANGE

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It is vitally important that Indigenous Youth are provided a forum to express and share their unique expertise and profound 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, their lives, and how childhood should be conceptualized. Employing the theoretical frameworks of Sociology of Childhood, children's rights, Indigenous culturally responsive method and a desire-centred research framework, 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 enormous 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 authentic ways.

Keywords: Indigenous, youth, community, change, social research with children

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my family. To my parents – Ted and Nancy, my brother Eric, my partner Ryan, and my sister Adar: you have been a model of strength, have believed in me when I doubted myself and continually push me forward. I love you all. To my brother Adam: you taught me the value of community, the importance of perseverance and grit, the essentiality of hope, and the necessity of laughter; may your love, your life, and your words always serve as a firm reminder of the preciousness and sacredness of life.

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## **Introduction**

Shaken by a school and community shooting nearly two years ago, community members of the Northern Village of La Loche, Saskatchewan have been tirelessly working to create a “comprehensive healing plan” (Trembath, 2017). After the tragic event, reporters, fellow Canadians, and politicians alike have searched and theorized why the events that took place on January 22, 2016 occurred. Some have suggested potential catalysts for this tragedy are relaxed gun control laws, the lack of youth supports, (Watters, 2016), the underfunding of social programs, or the persistent drug and alcohol addictions (Johnstone, 2016), while others have naïvely and discriminatorily suggested it is simply a problem of existing in the north (Gilmore, 2016). However, in all attempts to locate the problem, rarely were the views and perspectives of community members considered or honoured, nor were the perspectives of children or youth included.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to create a space for youth community members to share their perspectives on their town, their community and their lives as a way to gain insight into the type of change they deem important and necessary. The research questions that guided this project (as decided by the school Elder, the school Principal, and the Adult Advisor on the Dené Student Council) are, “What are the youth’s vision for their school and community?”; and “How do youth in the community conceptualize childhood?”

## **Socio-Cultural Location**

Absolon and Willett (2005) assert that fundamental to Indigenous methodology is the practice of the researcher locating themselves. Authors challenge the notion of objective research, and instead stress the importance of self-identifying yourself at the onset of the project as a way to ensure accountability, build trust, and decolonize research. Likewise, with many

Indigenous cultures, locating yourself at the beginning of a cultural tradition or meeting is an essential way to identify who you are and your connections to the larger community (Koster, Baccar, & Lemelin, 2012). To respect this tradition, I begin by locating myself as a researcher in an Indigenous community.

I am an 8<sup>th</sup> generation, white, European, Settler-Canadian, born and raised in Southern Ontario. My earliest known relative to live in Canada was born in Prince Edward Island in 1810 – though it is unknown at what time his parents settled on the Canadian East Coast. I grew up in a small, rural town, and as such developed a strong sense of responsibility to community and an awareness of the great importance of partnership and collaboration to create change where and when it is needed. I was raised without much consideration of my Canadian heritage or my white-settler privilege and lacked even a rudimentary knowledge of colonization and the oppression suffered by so many at the hands of those who have looked like me. Through recent educational and professional experiences, I have been pushed out of my comfort zones, and have had to acknowledge and reconcile with the reality that while I may not intentionally contribute to unfair systems of power and oppression, I am a beneficiary of them - and if I do not actively disrupt such power imbalances, I may be perpetuating these systems of injustice.

In recent years I have worked with an organization committed to anti-discrimination, equity and inclusion work, and would intentionally bring up these difficult conversations with various groups in hopes of creating shifts in perspectives that would lead to the creation of important and necessary social change. Through this role, I led discussions and workshops identifying and disassembling inequitable policies, practices and portrayals affecting various marginalized groups, including – but not limited to – Indigenous Canadians. This is to say that on a cognitive level I was aware of the struggles of the current social and political contexts in

which so many Indigenous peoples and communities exist in this country; however, it was not until January 22, 2016 that my awareness expanded and my world-view changed.

On that day, my brother Adam Wood died as a result of the school shooting that took place in La Loche, Saskatchewan. Adam had just arrived in the community six months previously to begin his teaching career, teaching grade ten math and science. In the immediate days that followed, my family was thrown into the chaos surrounding a highly publicized event, and were plagued with requests from media for interviews regarding our views and feelings on the tragedy and insights into my brother's life. We refused as strongly as we were able, and were struck by the focus of the story being the loss of my brother Adam, who was crafted as a caricature of a 'white knight,' or that of a 'good ol' Canadian boy,' rather than on the needs and perspectives of those in La Loche who experienced an equally devastating loss. It was then that we decided to speak up. We sent out a statement to the press which read in part,

...As communities come together to support one another, we must ask how to prevent anyone from experiencing a loss of this kind. Rather than looking for someone to blame, or coming up with outsider opinions of reasons why this occurred, we must stop and listen to the voices of La Loche. The leaders and members of the community know what types of support and changes are needed. Our responsibility as a nation is to listen and respond to create lasting systemic change. (CBC, 2016, para. 2)

It was through this tremendous loss that I began to see with painful clarity the hegemonic racism and regionalism affecting communities like La Loche that positioned my family's pain as devastating and unjust, but La Loche's pain as expected. This is unacceptable. This must change. I believe it is imperative that we create authentic spaces for Indigenous voices to be heard and spaces where others, like myself, must listen.

In early January 2017, the community held a public press conference to discuss changes that have already been made within their community and to stress the need for additional support. At this press conference, the Principal of the local high school discussed how they, “have hope, but need help” (CBC, 2017, para. 20). Later, when my family and I attended the one-year memorial in La Loche, the Principal again echoed this sentiment. He asked for us to keep pressure on our Members of Parliament and that we continue telling the story of La Loche in hopes that the necessary monies, services and supports would be provided to help them with the process of re-envisioning their school and community. At the memorial, as we were comforted, consoled and included in all parts of the service and reception it became clear that our collective losses bridged a gap across cultures and understandings and that the formation of a relationship built on mutual respect and collective healing had begun.

Soon after the memorial I discussed the idea of this project with the school Principal. He was excited by the prospect of providing his students the opportunity to share their perceptions of their community and school. In the months and year following the community shooting there has been much said about and on behalf of the community, often painted by a single stroke, as one National Post headline stated: “[A] Town Without Hope” (O’Connor & Hill, 2016). This study aimed to provide community members a space to reclaim the narrative and stories told of their community, and will empower some of the community’s youngest citizens – those who are so often overlooked – to be given the opportunity to speak about their community, while also interrupting the intentional cycle of silencing those most affected by the tragedy. This is why La Loche was selected for this study.

Additionally, through the shared loss of our loved ones, a relationship between myself and community members was built on mutual respect, commitment to growth and a path of healing.

One of the first steps in the process of this research was to obtain research ethics approval from Ryerson University's Research Ethics Board (REB). REBs in Canada follow the national guidelines – the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS). Chapter nine of the TCPS, *Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada* (2010), was created to resolve the deep dissatisfaction with colonial research on Aboriginal peoples resulting in the harvesting of information and distortions of its translations (Castellano & Reading, 2010). This chapter of the TCPS attempts to uphold the traditional value of maintaining respectful, mutually beneficial relations and stresses the importance of a connection to the community in order to do research with Indigenous Populations (Castellano & Reading, 2010). This research project was born out of a relationship and a commitment to the community, and intended as a way to “keep the pressure on,” (G. Hatch, personal communication, January 23, 2017) while supporting students to “own their truth” (G. Hatch, personal communication, June 1, 2017). In this way, this project was designed in collaboration with Greg Hatch, the Principal of the high school, Martha Morin the teacher advisor of the Dene Student council, and Pauline Fontaine, the school elder to examine how youth envision their community moving forward, and how youth conceptualize childhood.

Although past professional experiences have brought me as a visitor to Northern Ontario communities, I do not know what it is like to live in the North, nor what it means to be Indigenous. For these reasons, it was vitally important that throughout all stages of this research process I critically examined my perspectives and findings, and that I collaborated and sought

support with a research advisory committee created for this project to reduce the potential effect of my own lived experiences impacting the results of the study.

### **Review of Literature**

The purpose of this review will be to further understand the literature in relation to the experiences of Indigenous children within Canada, as well as their ability and adults' collective responsibility to create spaces where they are authentically heard. This will be done by identifying the historical factors that impact and create our current settler-colonial context as well as its effect on Indigenous children and youth. Finally, I will illustrate 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.

### **Colonization**

This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada's confederation. Celebrations will, and have been carried out across the country, and estimates have been made that more than half a billion dollars will be spent to commemorate the occasion (Hannay, 2017). However, as plans and celebrations are prepared, many individuals are critically questioning what it is we are in fact celebrating. The truth is, Canada does not have a spotless past. While for some this year marks 150 years of confederation and 'successful' settlement upon Canadian soil, for others it serves as a reminder of the more than 150 years of violence and oppression under colonization and a relationship that has swung from partnership to domination, from mutual respect and co-operation to paternalism and attempted assimilation (RCAP, 1996).

For over a century Canada has been committed to the silencing of Indigenous voices through the denial of Indigenous rights through 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 made by individuals, communities, institutions and government agencies to recognize and rectify the violence committed to Indigenous communities across Canada, in what Alfred (2010) titles, a “global era of apology and reconciliation” (Alfred, 2010), the process has only just begun.

In 2008, Stephen Harper the (now former) Prime Minister issued an apology on behalf of the government of Canada that stated in part:

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language... The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. (Harper, 2008, para. 3 & 8) (refer to the full apology in Appendix A)

This apology finalized the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which was produced in response to the thousands of lawsuits by Indian Residential Schools (IRS) survivors and was accompanied by the provision of lump sums to survivors of the IRS system, as well as the creation of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Cook, 2017). The TRC was officially established on June 1, 2008 and had 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... and to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). The final report of the TRC was published in 2015 and identifies the formation and operation of the Indian Residential School system as a policy of cultural genocide in that it aimed to “destroy structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” (Cook, 2017, p. 1).

The potential of the TRC, and the Prime Minister's apology to allow and facilitate genuine reconciliation relies heavily on how these emotional stories and experiences are viewed, heard, and remembered (Cook, 2017). We must see this as the "beginning of a meaningful process" (Cook, 2017, p. 79) rather than the "resolution of reconciliation" (Cook, 2017, p. 79). These transformations must occur "at all levels of governance, administration and implementation, for all ages and all times" (Greenwood, 2016, p. 27) and we must begin to understand and accept that we are all bound by the treaties signed and that we are all implicated.

**Settler-colonial context.** Nagy (2013) and Coulthard (2014) critiqued the TRC as it positions the harms and violence of colonization strictly in the past while failing to recognize the reality of an ongoing colonial present. Contemporary Canada is situated within a settler colonial context defined by the specific establishment of colonization in which the colonizer comes to stay (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013) and "destroys to replace" (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). Settler-colonization is a structure not an event (Wolfe, 2006), which makes whiteness superior and normalized (Wynter, 2003) and the "arbiter of citizenship, civility, and knowing" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 73). Settler-colonization largely reaffirms narratives of Indigenous pathology in such ways that it often frames current social, economic, and health disparities experienced by Indigenous communities as part of an ongoing Indian problem rather than as an ongoing Settler problem (Cook, 2017).

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 – that of proclaiming ignorance as a way to escape responsibility and culpability (Regan, 2010). This is part of the Settler problem, the willfully sustained ignorance and complicity in past and present colonialism (Cook, 2017), and its repercussions are severe. As stated by the TRC (2015), 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, 2015a). Many Canadians do 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) that passed in 2007 (Nicol, 2016) recognizes 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 (Nicol, 2016). Though the effects of this intentional and on-going colonization are far reaching, they can be seen and felt most harshly by those most vulnerable – children and youth.

**Indigenous children and youth.** Due to the history of violence and oppression caused to Indigenous communities, Indigenous children trail the rest of Canada's children on virtually every measure of well-being: health, infant mortality, family income, educational attainment, as well as access to the necessities of life such as safe drinking water, and adequate and safe housing (Macdonald & Wilson, 2013). In 2011, it was reported that 48% of children in foster care within Canada have Aboriginal heritage, although Aboriginal children in Canada only

account for 7% of Canada's children (Turner, 2016). Additionally, the 2006 census found that Indigenous children suffer the worst child poverty rates: 51% of status First Nations children live in poverty, rising to 60% if they live on a reserve (Macdonald & Wilson, 2016) while those living in Saskatchewan suffer the highest rates of poverty (64%) (Macdonald & Wilson, 2013). Moreover, Indigenous children in Canada experience higher rates of asthma and bronchitis, tuberculosis, childhood obesity and diabetes, hearing loss from chronic ear infections, experience lower rates of immunization than non-Indigenous children, and experience higher rates of youth suicide within particular Indigenous communities (Eni, 2009). The failure of current provincial, territorial and federal policies to adequately care for these children is clear. The link between the denial of basic human rights for Indigenous children and their poverty is palpable, and the failure to act results in a more arduous, less advantageous, and a shorter life span for Indigenous peoples (Macdonald & Wilson, 2013).

Furthermore, Indigenous populations within Canada are the fastest growing, and youngest population within the country (Statistics Canada, 2011). The median age of Indigenous population in Canada is 28-years-old, compared to a 41-year-old median age of non-Indigenous persons (Statistics Canada, 2011) and one-third of total Indigenous populations are under 14-years of age (Adelson, 2005). This means that conditions affecting Indigenous children affect a substantial percentage of the overall population of Indigenous persons living in Canada. Therefore, if the lives of Indigenous Canadians are to be accurately represented in policy, it is imperative that we seek the perceptions of children and youth. If we are to mark the next 150 years by reconciliation rather than assimilation and oppression we must recognize the Settler problem, acknowledge that we are all implicated, and we must listen and respect the views of Indigenous peoples – including the children and youth.

## **Children and Youth as Experts in Their Own Lives**

The Sociology of Childhood conceives youth as a marginalized group (Mayall, 2000, 2002) typically viewed by society as human becomings rather than human beings (Albanese, 2009). Youth are vital to a culture, a way of knowing, and a way of being (Greenwood, 2016), and hold unique perspectives due to their individual standpoint as a specific generational culture (Mayall, 2002). Therefore, when engaged in the process of envisioning community change it is vital to recognize and include youth as competent social actors able to contribute to change in meaningful and authentic ways (Skovdol & Andreouli, 2011). This is especially true of the youth in La Loche at this time. Currently, La Loche exists within a time of transition. Politicians and external funders are looking at La Loche and trying to evaluate and assess the best ways to move forward, which is all the more reason it is imperative that youth share their unique perspectives and their expertise on their community and lives.

**Youth voice as insight into a generational cohort.** Mayall (2002), has argued that children exist within their individual cohort, and hold a particular and unique view of their world and their culture. This thinking – termed as the standpoint theory (Mayall, 2002), argues that children’s viewpoint, although potentially different from that of adults, is able to provide important insight into a generation and their unique way of being. Within this project, young people of La Loche, Saskatchewan were provided a platform and direct opportunity to speak, thus allowing others (researchers, parents, supporting adults, and policy makers) the direct opportunity and vital responsibility to listen.

In a study by Sargeant and Gillett-Swan (2015), pre-adolescent children demonstrated their unique perspectives when asked about their views of adults within their lives. Four major themes were found within their research: i) children’s desire for acknowledgement of their own

capacity (that they can complete everyday tasks); ii) children's perspectives that young people and adults should work together (that they may need help at times); iii) children's feelings of dissatisfaction connected to their current position in relation to adults (that they feel trapped); and iv) children's desire for acknowledgement and respect (that adults don't know everything). Sargeant and Gillett-Swan (2015) highlight in great detail the incredible aptitude that children demonstrate to highlight areas of improvement unseen to others because as children they belong to a specific generational cohort. The authors argue that by including children's voices within educational reformation outcomes were better accomplished and that demonstration and enhanced acknowledgement of children's rights was achieved (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015, p. 188). Sargeant and Gillett-Swan (2015) further demonstrated that although many service providers acknowledge the importance and the benefits of listening to children's voices, many policy makers still exclude the voices of youth. The authors posit that this may be due to insufficient research that effectively includes children's perspectives subsequently affecting policy makers' beliefs in using child-voice as a viable and worthwhile option (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015)

Kellock (2011) examined the voices of five Maori children in New Zealand and their perceptions of well-being. In this study, children (eight to ten-years-old) were involved in a photo-voice project and asked to take photos of places or things that held significant importance to them. They were later interviewed at their schools about their rationale and reflections of the photos taken. The photos illustrated a cross-section of their community including immediate family members, extended family, school staff, and friends as well as locations at their school that held significant importance to them including the playground, their school mural, and the 'sick bay' – where students go when they are not feeling well. Upon closer investigation, the themes

identified by the children, which may have differed if identified by adults, were found to be connected to Maori values of emphasis on community responsibility, fairness and inclusion (Kellock, 2011). Therefore, we must shift the paternalizing lens in our work and research with children and youth and instead look for ways to learn from them as social actors and experts in their own lives.

**Youth voice as empowerment.** Only when listening to the voices of those who know the issues most intimately and who are most directly affected can supports be provided to individuals in such a way that allows them to be empowered (as they define it), within their particular context (Rappaport, 1995). Skovdal and Andreouli (2011) demonstrated the importance of providing youth spaces to self-identify, as well as the inherent capacity of youth to do so. As a way to better understand and promote resilience that best suits the needs of the children involved, the authors examined the conceptualizations of Kenyan children who hold the primary responsibility of caregiving for their parents. Skovdal and Andreouli (2011) argue that children and youth should be able to represent themselves as they see fit rather than relying on external conceptualizations of what childhood should look like. Skovdal and Andreouli (2011) attempted to shift the viewing of caregiving children from the deficit model of caregiving children to one of agency and empowerment. Their research found that the children interviewed did not speak of their lives in unpleasant terms, but instead identified themselves as having great agency, as being competent contributors, and of having a great deal of pride in their labour. This study illustrates the importance of allowing youths, especially those who are consistently been viewed through a deficit lens, the opportunity to share their unique insights into their own lives, rather than allowing and relying on the perspectives of outsiders (Skovdal & Andreouli, 2011).

Additionally, Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun (2010) demonstrated the role of youth in research as a way to become empowered critical thinkers and community planners. In their study, the authors engaged youth in a photo-voice project aimed to simultaneously heighten youths' 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 (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2010). Youth identified core areas of improvement as being that of the creation of a safe community in addition to more positive programs for youth. As a result of this research, local organizations began working to identify ways to respond to youths' specific concerns (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2010). If youth are not consulted, then there is no way to ensure their specific and unique needs are met. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the youth who participated in this project gained deeper insight and awareness about the importance of youth engagement in their own community resulting in a greater change in several projects throughout their city – specifically focusing on an increase in youth collaboration (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2010).

Furthermore, Flicker et al., (2014), demonstrated the transformative potential of involving youth in arts-based research. Their study, which included Indigenous youth as participants from six communities across Canada, used arts-based practices as a means of envisioning decolonizing approaches to address elevated rates of HIV in Indigenous communities in Canada (Flicker et al., 2014). They found that this method of youth engagement allowed youth to self-represent in constructive ways that disassembled popular stereotypes (Flicker et al., 2014). It is therefore especially relevant for Indigenous youth, who are so often labelled negatively due to the prevalence of racism, to be given the space to be viewed as authorities on the subjects of their way of life and culture while also providing spaces where they

can declare to the nation, as one participant stated, “we are living in this world too” (Flicker et al., 2014, p. 30).

**Youth voice as insight into a specific way of knowing.** The inclusion of children’s insights is critical because children are keepers of their culture and specific Indigenous ways of knowing (Little Bear, 2000). In this research project, youth live in a community where 90% of the region’s population reports as being Aboriginal (Keewatin Yatthé Regional Health Authority, 2016). For this reason, it is imperative to see youth as being able to offer critical insight within a generational culture, and to better understand their specific ethno-cultural standpoint.

Within Canada, Indigenous peoples are often found at the high end of negative health indicators, and the low end of positive health indicators (Greenwood, de Leeuw, & Fraser, 2007; Eni, 2009), largely situating them within the dominant and Western conceptualization of being ‘at risk’. However, diverse Indigenous nations have demonstrated resiliency for thousands of years prior to the arrival of colonial powers and have certainly survived, and are currently surviving the uncountable experiences of traumas brought on to them by colonialism (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005). The problem then is not that Indigenous populations are not resilient, but rather that normatively prescribed resiliency markers and health indicators, in their very design, exclude Indigenous ways of being, and that historically Indigenous beliefs about resilience and well-being, especially those of children, have been actively suppressed and denied.

Definitions of resilience rely on indicators such as educational attainment, mental health, and socio-economic status (Tummala-Narra, 2007) that are socially produced and reflective of the dominant society (Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009). This is problematic as it can lead to misdiagnoses and misconceptions of those not represented by dominant society (Wexler et al., 2009). For example, educational attainment is frequently noted as a positive outcome and a

marker of resilience. However, the meaning of this accomplishment may vary from one community to another. For Indigenous communities who have experienced cultural genocide through assimilation in the forced educational environments of residential schools (Blackstock, & Trocmé, 2005) it may be argued that it is more resilient for them to resist the educational system, to leave school or act against their own cultural regulation than it is for them to excel within the current system (Wexler et al., 2009). Additionally, teen pregnancy is frequently identified by the dominant society as a risk factor (Wilson et al., 2014); however, the notion of adolescence as a distinct period in the life cycle between childhood and adulthood is a colonial construction, negating the histories of many Indigenous peoples that viewed these young people as functioning as adults, responsible for starting families (Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003). For this reason, normative constructions of positive outcomes and markers of health and well-being must be critically restructured and extended to include traditional Indigenous approaches to healing, well-being, and ways of knowing and must include the perspectives of community members (Baskin, 2007).

Traditional Indigenous notions of healing 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 notions of healing and well-being, attempts must be made to capture and respect understandings of resilience from the people in which they came, and to empower youth to connect and share these cultural perspectives (Young, et al., 2013). This means broadening conventional definitions of resilience and well-being to include Indigenous culturally distinctive concepts and by actively engaging Indigenous youth in the



process of envisioning community health, well-being, and community change. Only when policy makers engage with the population it intends to support can we effectively understand the specific cultural and generational needs as they identify them. It is for these reasons I invited youth to speak as experts on their own lives to provide a more accurate portrayal of the specific needs and desires of this community.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### **Paradigm**

The paradigm that will be used for the purpose for this paper will be the transformative worldview. Transformative researchers believe that “inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political agenda to confront social oppression on whatever level it occurs” (Creswell, 2013, p. 9). This theory, which posits that participants should have a role in all areas of the research study process, believes that in doing so, transformative research can provide a voice to marginalized and historically silenced groups, empowering participants to advance an agenda for change to improve their lives (Creswell, 2013). This paradigm will inform all subsequent theoretical frameworks.

**Sociology of childhood.** All stages of this study were reinforced by the Sociology of Childhood. This theoretical framework 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). This approach to seeing children as social actors rather than objects recognizes that children are able to shape their own identities, understand and create their own views, and have a right to participate in the world around them (McNaughton, 2007). 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 – but not inferior to that of adults; and that children have unique perspectives and insights that can improve adult’s understandings and perceptions of children’s experiences (MacNaughton, 2007). By acknowledging and respecting the important perspectives of youth, this study intended to move past objectifying children, and instead aimed to view them as “competent experts in their own ideas and experiences” (Barnikis, 2015).

**Desire-centred approach.** Historically, efforts to define Indigenous peoples and communities have been based on deficit models (emphasizing the ‘problem’ as existing within the person, family or community) or damage-centred approaches (which emphasize persons as damaged due to historical and social problems) (Tuck, 2009). The latter, which looks to historical exploitation, assimilation, and colonization – among other acts of violence – to explain the prevalence of particular risk factors within Indigenous cultures, may in turn define a population of people by their oppression, rather than their triumphs and successes (Tuck, 2009). The popularity of this model of resiliency is largely due to the colonial structures of governance that document communities’ experiences of pain and loss in order to obtain particular political and material gain. Instead, Tuck (2009) posits that we must engage in desire-centred research and approaches. Desire-centred approaches, though still accounting for loss, despair and risks, also includes at its forefront dimensions of hope, pride, and wisdom of lives lived well (Tuck, 2009). Intentionally created spaces must be made available to recognize particular patterns of inequalities, while simultaneously recognizing and highlighting the strengths, hopes, and joys

experienced by those beyond the margins. For this reason, it is imperative to make sure we find ways to include and honour the voices of young Indigenous people.

**Child’s rights-based approach.** A child’s rights-based perspective underpins this study. This perspective, informed by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly, 1989), posits that children are citizens that have distinct human rights, which should 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). Carol Bellamy, former Executive Director of UNICEF stated that “In a world wounded by conflict and divided by poverty it is absolutely essential that children can be embraced, listened to, and given a role in crafting a better future for themselves” (UNICEF, 2002, para. 3). The primary role of this study was to do just that.

**Indigenous culturally responsive method.** Due to the high population who self-identify as Aboriginal (93.5%) in the Northern Village of La Loche (KYRHA, 2016), it is imperative that an Indigenous culturally responsive method was utilized for this study. John Akweniiotha Hodson (2013) states that with Indigenous culturally responsive research methods, “there is no space between the researched and the researcher... it is the deep human relationship that spawn a deeper dialogue about those differences and results in a more complete understanding” (p. 355). With this in mind, it is essential that the Tri-Council Policy chapter nine, and all associated ethical principles and practices of involving Indigenous peoples in research are considered and followed. Research that has taken place involving Indigenous peoples has historically been fraught with exploitation, misrepresentation, and objectification (Ball & Janyst, 2008). For these reasons, non-Indigenous researchers must employ new forms of engagement that seek to build up Indigenous peoples and restore power in their work with outside institutions (Ball & Janyst,

2008). Piquemal (2000) has laid out four principles to guide research with Indigenous populations. The principles are: i) to establish a partnership before seeking consent in order to ensure consent is informed; ii) to consult with relevant authorities (Elders, parents, children); iii) 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; iv) to provide participants with the findings before the report is made final (Piquemal, 2000). In line with this, it is necessary that when working with Indigenous communities a connection and commitment to the community exists (Lavallée, 2009). As stated in my socio-cultural location, my connection to the community through tragedy may have had potential for emotional distress for myself and the participants who participated in this study. However, I am opposed to the notion that emotions equal damage or distress. Emotions connect us to our mental processes. When we think, when we question, when we postulate, emotion is part of that process (Lavallée, 2009). For this reason, research should not be made devoid of emotion, but rather, it is the intelligent use of our emotions and the ethical awareness of the researcher that may be crucial to obtaining benefits for both the participants and the researcher from the process (Watts, 2008). As, Chickasaw scholar Eber Hampton (as cited in Akweniostha Hodson, 2013) further stated,

One thing I say about research is that there is a motive. I believe the reason is emotional because we feel. We feel because we are hungry, cold, afraid, brave, loving, or hateful. We do what we do for reasons, emotional reasons. That is the engine that drives us. That is the gift of the Creator of life. Life feels... Feeling is connected to our intellect and we ignore, hide from, disguise, and suppress that feeling at our peril and at the peril of those around us. Emotionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual, academic research is a

goddamn lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves, and a lie to other people. Humans feeling, living breathing, thinking humans – do research. We try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to people around us. (p. 358)

It is for these reasons that although I am emotionally connected to this research, I feel I was able to use my connection and relationship as an advantage for supporting and connecting to participants and supporting the research throughout the process.

For the most part, the theoretical frameworks laid out within this section work successfully in tandem with one another. However, there does exist a tension between Indigenous culturally responsive method and the children's rights-rights based approach. The Indigenous culturally responsive method focuses on collective rights whereas the children's rights-based approach focuses on individual rights. This is not to say that they could not both be used to frame this study, but rather that we must recognize children's perspectives and rights in connection and relation with community rights and perspectives (Caplan, Loomis & Di Santo, 2016); thus, ensuring that the needs of the surrounding community are also reflected and included in the project. In keeping with these approaches, this study included a research advisory committee who offered feedback, suggestions, and corrections as they saw fit.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of 11 Indigenous youth from La Loche, Saskatchewan regarding their views on their community. Wab Kinew, a prominent Indigenous advocate and Member of the Legislative Assembly of Canada asserted that it is imperative that we seek out the perspectives of community members, and added, "If we're serious about this rhetoric of reconciliation, then the era of outsiders imposing solutions in

northern communities should be over” (as cited in, Stuek, Tait, & Baum, 2016, para. 19). It is essential that we look first to the perspectives of community members before creating policies intended to help, and it is equally important to include the voices and perspectives of youth. Mayall (2002), a theorist of the Sociology of Childhood, deems that the frequent overlooking and silencing of children’s perspectives provides them –as a generational cohort– with the status of being a marginalized group. Children are not only aware of the challenges and strengths of their community, but they are also acutely cognizant of how they are directly affected (Berry, 2002; Weinger, 1998). Thus, when attempting to understand the community as a whole - its strengths and its challenges – we must include the voices of young people.

### **Method**

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is an approach that allows researchers to further understand and explore the meaning which their participants place on a social situation (Creswell, 2013). It allows for a more naturalistic approach to the subject matter, accepts that there are a variety of different ways to make sense of the world, and is most interested in uncovering the meanings expressed by participants and creating a deeper understanding into how others may see and experience the world around them (Jones, 1995). This approach was selected to ensure youth were situated as experts in their own lives and able to define their community and experiences within it as they so decided.

The gathering of information from Indigenous communities is fraught with exploitation and often fails to authentically consult with community members regarding what information should be collected, who should gather the information, and who should have access to it (RCAP, 1996). This failure to include the perspectives of community representatives within the research process subsequently leaves many Indigenous communities feeling “researched to

death” (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2005, p. 3). Therefore, it was imperative that this research project take the form of a community-based research (CBR) study. CBR emphasizes the ethical principles of self-determination, independence, equity, and holds that individuals have the inherent ability to assess their strengths and needs and have the right to identify them as they see fit (Minkler, 2004). CBR attempts to equitably involve community partners and participants to draw on their own experiences, in order to share decision-making responsibilities and build on community capacity (Castledon, et al., 2008; Israel, Schulz, Paker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler, 2004). In an attempt to depart from traditional research methodologies that place the researcher in the position of the knowledge maker, this method focuses on the socially created nature of scientific knowledge by including the perspectives of non-academic researchers and participants (Israel, et al., 1998). As a result, CBR has become increasingly used by Indigenous peoples in Canada (Castledon, et al., 2008), and it is for this reason it was selected for this study.

Though I have certainly been welcomed in to the community in many ways it is important to acknowledge my position as a non-Indigenous adult researcher engaging Indigenous youth participants in research. As a result of this positionality it was imperative to employ strategies to ensure accountability to the people and community I was working with. This was accomplished by setting up a research advisory committee made up of the school’s Elder, Principal and the teacher advisor of the school council that I could consult with throughout the process. Next, I spoke with participants throughout the project to ensure consent was informed and on-going; and finally, I member checked with participants throughout the data collection process through face-to-face conversations and e-mail correspondence to ensure their testimonies were what they intended and to allow for corrections if necessary (Piquemal, 2000).

Additionally, I made a concerted effort to ensure that the youth were in control of the agenda of our conversations and that they were able to control the pace and direction of our conversations so that they could highlight themes and ideas important to them (Mayall, 2000). This does not eradicate issues of power and control, but it can give marginalized youth the potential to feel more in control over their stories and the situation (Dockett & Perry, 2005).

### **Setting**

The Northern Village of La Loche is located in Northern Saskatchewan on Treaty 8 Territory and has a population of 2,370 people – over half of which are under the age of 24-years-old (Statistics Canada, 2017). Due to the high proportion of youth within the community, it is imperative in this time of transition and change to include the voices of youth as a way to provide further understanding of the specific needs and strengths of the community.

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. All interviews took place in an office at the school which was located in a familiar area of the building. This space served as my office during my time at the school. Additionally, youth were able to collect their data as they so decided within their community (outside the school walls).

### **Participants**

For the purpose of this research study, youth will be defined as being between the ages of 12-19-years old, and community will be defined by participants as they see fit (e.g., school community, their town, their culture, their region). Nine of the eleven participants asked to use their real names, while two created pseudonyms to use for this study.



The participants of this study were 11 youth between the ages of 13- and 19-years-old who attended the local high school. Of the participants, 8 were female, and 3 were male; 9 identified as Dené, 1 identified as Métis, and 1 identified as both Dené and Métis; 10 students lived in the Northern Village of La Loche, and 1 participant lived on the local reserve.

The project was open to all interested youth who returned their consent forms. There were no exclusion criteria for this project (other than attending the high school) as preventing interested youth from participating may in turn continue the cycle of silencing their voices – consequently causing further marginalization. For this reason, accommodations were made for students, such as having a Dené speaking translator, as over 88% of community members' first language is Dené (Statistics Canada, 2017), a student support worker (to account for varying needs of students), and accessing the school Elder to offer emotional support if required. However, the students who participated did not request such supports.

Piquemal's (2000) principles to guide research with Indigenous communities include ensuring an informed partnership is established with the community before seeking REB approval. Therefore, before obtaining approval from the Ryerson University's REB I had already communicated and established a partnership with the research advisory committee of the high school in La Loche. As such, I was given a letter of support from the Principal of the school for the project, we crafted a partnership agreement, I e-mailed the Chief of the local reserve to inform him of the study (the community school was not located on the reserve but it was possible that potential participants from the local reserve would be interested in the project), and I received permission from the School Community Council to implement the project.

## **Recruitment**

This study employed a purposive sampling model (Denscombe, 2014). My decision to speak to youth in the community was a purposeful one. To begin, as established in the theoretical framework the Sociology of Childhood, it is important to value the perspectives of children and youth and to treat them as experts within their own lives. Children and youth – more specifically Indigenous children and youth – have long been “objects of inquiry” (Dockett & Perry, 2005, p. 5), meaning that research has been done on them instead of with them. For this reason, I wanted to engage youth in the process of research in order to learn about their unique way of seeing their world.

After I received approval from the REB, I travelled to the Northern Village of La Loche to begin the process of data collection. Data were collected over one month. To gain access to participants I visited classrooms identified by the school Principal and informed them of my study. I first spoke of my connection to the school through my brother and stressed that participation was strictly voluntary to ensure informed consent was granted and that students felt in no way obligated to participate in the study. Next I spoke of the study with students and informed them of all that was involved and distributed an information letter and a consent form to families. Finally, I invited interested participants to attend a photography workshop that I had planned to take place two days later.

The photography workshop was planned to have a dual purpose: first to provide additional information regarding photo-voice, photography, and an overview of the project; and second to allow participants the opportunity to become familiar with me as a researcher. However, due to various extra-curricular activities going on at the school only two participants attended the workshop. After this, and with the permission of administration staff and teachers, I visited more classrooms, spoke to students in the hall between classes and ensured that my office

at the school was a friendly and inviting space for students to enter into and chat. Recruitment was in turn discussed with students on an individual basis as they visited with me in my office.

## Measures

Data were collected through photo-voice which is rooted in democratic ideals and intended to create spaces for participants to influence social and health policy by using a specific photographic technique to teach, to inform, and to illustrate community issues and community life (Wang, 2005; Wang & Burris, 1997). Wang (2006) identified three goals for photo-voice: 1) to support individuals with reflecting and recording specific community issues; 2) to encourage conversation on these issues; and 3) to influence policy-makers and politicians. This method was selected as it is an unobtrusive way of entering into youth's worlds (Woodgate & Skarlato, 2015), and because it provides youth the opportunity to share their unique perspectives and ideas about their community.

**Photos.** Students were given two handouts. The first, *Photography Safety and Consent* adapted from First, Mills-Sandoval, First, & Houston, (2016) discussed the importance of obtaining consent from individuals if they or their property appear in any photos, as well as how to remain safe when taking photos. The youth also received *Talking to People* (adapted from Council, M.A.P., 2015), which outlines how to introduce yourself, how to discuss the project, and how to ask permission to take someone's photo and then use it. Additionally, the *Talking to People* handout included the interview questions, 1) What is your life like?; 2) What is good about your life?; 3) What makes you strong?; 4) What needs to change?; and 5) What should childhood look like?. These questions were adapted from Skovdal & Andreouli (2011) (see Appendix B for approval). Given the scope of this project, students were asked to take one photo

per question. Participants took pictures during their free time around their school and community, and returned at a time that was most convenient for them to discuss their photos.

**Interviews.** Participants had the option to discuss their photos one-on-one, in pairs, or in small groups. When participants returned to discuss their photos, they were asked additional questions intended to help clarify their rationale for their photo selection. Additional questions were adapted from Skovdal and Andreouli (2011) included: 1) I want to share this photo because ... ; 2) What story would you like to share about this photo?; and 3) How does this story relate to your life and/or the lives of people in your community? However, the questions were used as prompts rather than as structured questions, which allowed for a more organic and authentic sharing of the story behind each photo and for a reflexive elaboration (Tracy, 2010).

During this process, I manually transcribed and audio-recorded interviews to ensure the youths' ideas were captured as accurately as possible. Three participants expressed discomfort with audio-recording so I manually documented our conversation. At the end of the interview or group discussion, participants had the opportunity to listen to the recording and could clarify what had been said.

There were two exceptions to the data collection process. The first was that one participant chose to draw pictures rather than take photos to represent their ideas, and the second was that one participant wished to provide written rather than spoken accounts of their photos. The data collection process was subsequently adapted to properly reflect the desires and capacity of youth involved to ensure their ideas, voices, and autonomy were acknowledged and respected.

### **Data Analysis**

Within my own research report, I organized the youth's perceptions through the use of an audio-recording device along with a research diary. I displayed the photos selected by the

participants on my computer as we talked about each one. After discussing each photo, I summarized each statement to allow for confirmation and/or adjustments to be made by the participants. I knew that I had sufficient data when youth confirmed that my understanding of their expressed testimonies matched what they had intended to illustrate.

I coded by looking specifically for particular themes and patterns that arose from the field notes and audio files, and categorized those findings. I did this by first categorizing the raw data through open coding which is characterized by the first read through of the recently gathered data (Neuman, 2004). Next, I assigned specific labels in an attempt to organize and condense the vast amount of data into categories by carefully reading all field notes, transcribing audio files, and compiling the written narratives of the youth. Following this, I used the margins on the written document to begin the creation of new codes and themes. At this point I also used my theoretical frameworks to assist in examining my data and subsequent codes and I went through the data a second time and conducted axial coding (Neuman, 2004). In this phase of coding I focused primarily on the previously coded themes rather than the data itself. Additional codes that emerged were noted, but my focus remained on categorizing the themes created in open-coding. Next, I began the selective coding phase (Neuman, 2004). I looked at specific cases that illustrated the themes identified and compared and contrasted ideas between findings. I then identified early themes that were found and further elaborated and concretized the meanings (Neuman, 2004).

Finally, in line with the Indigenous culturally responsive method outlined previously with the Sociology of Childhood, I contacted all participants who were interested in member checking to ensure the themes that I identified were in line with what they intended to share.

Participants confirmed the themes I suggested to them and one student made a minor adjustment to their shared testimony.

## **Findings**

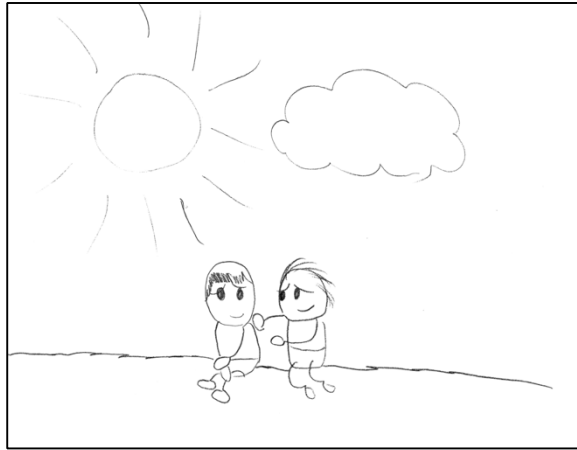
### **Introduction**

Through the data generated from the photographs taken and the conversations I had with the youth, I was able to identify core aspects of what the youth value now and for the future, and what they believe childhood should look like. In the analysis that follows, each theme will be discussed as it relates to the youths' perspectives to highlight the specific tenets that emerged under each. Four major themes that arose from the data were as follows: i) relationships, ii) health and well-being, iii) knowledge, and iv) the importance of community and culture.

### **Relationships**

The value youth placed on relationships became overwhelmingly clear through a variety of photographs, illustrations and interviews. 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.** When I asked Harry, “What makes you strong,” he quickly began drawing a picture of a boy and his friend (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Harry’s drawing of the comfort of friendship.

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.’

Harry also shared, “I think friendship is powerful.” This notion of comfort gained from relationships was a theme throughout the participants’ responses. Ashlynn and Kaylin spoke of the importance of their mothers. Ashlynn shared that she, “can tell her [mother] everything, and she tells [her] everything too” and Kaylin discussed the reassurance she receives from her mother when she’s feeling sad.



*Figure 2. Zach's picture of friendship.*

Zach explained that friendships makes 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.” Please refer to Figure 2 for Zach’s photograph of what makes him strong.

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, “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).





*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 – eventually a rainbow will arise 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 youths’ lives was evident through their sharing about their relationships. Ashlynn explained how her friendships made 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.

What should childhood look like. Of the eleven participants, ten stressed the importance of children playing outside and staying away from technology. 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.”



*Figure 4. Kaydence's picture of a childhood outdoors.*

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.” Furthermore, Jazz shared that “we were meant to explore this earth like children do. Unhindered by fear, propelled by curiosity and a sense of discovery.”

Stated by ten of the eleven youth, it was clear that participants considered it best for young children to spend their time outdoors away from technology. Kaylin 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.

The youths' responses to moving away from technology was particularly surprising as their insight was often shared amidst a backdrop of technological equipment. We used a computer to

view the digital photographs while discussing them, iPads, tablets, digital cameras, and cell phones were used to capture the photos, and audio recording devices were used to record the interviews with the participants. It was in this space, where youth would share with me their belief that children should not be using technology.

**Connection and responsibility.** Many of the youth spoke about the importance of having a connection to others and 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 and pets.

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.

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. Jazz spoke of the importance of the bond he has with his recently purchased Great Dane, Rocky. He shared,

He's great to have around. Both of us get along so well. True bonding is not measured by time spent together, but by the comfort you find when you realize you have each other. If I could give my dog one thing in life, I would give him the ability to see himself through my eyes. Only then would he realize how special he is to me (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Jazz's dog, Rocky representing "true bonding".

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 her picture of her property with an overcast sky to represent the concerning and changing weather patterns (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Ashlynn's photograph representing concerning weather patterns.

This year, unlike other years, spring was especially wet and cold. 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

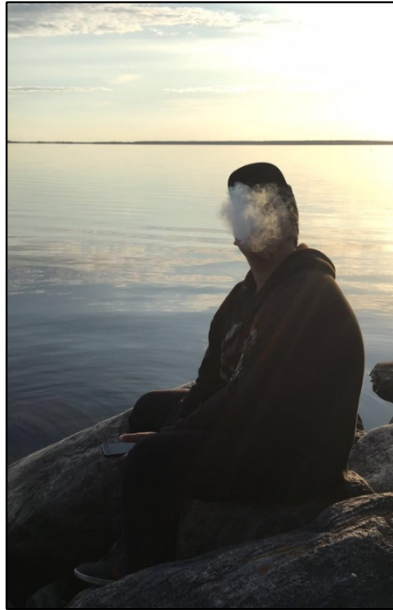
clean, safe, and good.” Similarly, Jazz shared that it is important that he respects the land in the same way he respects others. He stressed that,

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 its nothing.

### **Health and Well-Being**

Health and well-being is the balance between the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual realms (Lavalley, 2009) and it was cross-cutting across all themes. The themes that emerged from the data relating to health and well-being are the importance of physical health, a reflexive awareness of their mental health, and the 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 and commitment to exercise. Zach and Jazz acknowledged the problem of addiction within their community when responding to the question, “What needs to change?” and 7 of the 11 participants suggested that youth should spend less time on technology and more time outside. 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” (see Figure 8).



*Figure 8.* Shauntel’s photograph of youth smoking.

Shauntel further expressed her critical awareness of unhealthy habits by stating, “you kind of need to make your own decisions, don’t start bad habits just because your friends have them.”

**Reflexive awareness of 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 to each.

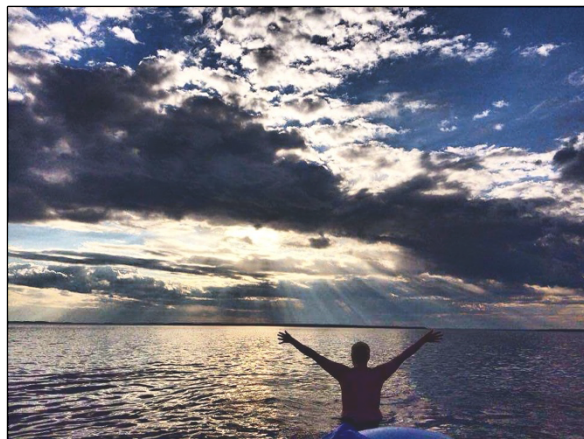
***Positive Influences.*** The interview questions were intentionally chosen because of their focus on participant strengths rather than their challenges. This provided the opportunity for youth to reflect upon the positive influences in their lives, particularly in response to the questions “What is good about your life?” and “What makes you strong?” Findings as they particularly relate to the positive influences affecting participant mental health are presented in this section.



Emily discussed how the northern lights make her strong. She shared that when she feels stressed she will go for a walk to view them and that they make her calm, “especially when they dance.” In response to the question, “What should childhood look like?”, Shauntel demonstrated the importance of being grateful and showed a photograph of a sunset. 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?” (see Figure 9). He expressed,

Life is all about living in the moment, day by day, and don't stress about the future.

People are so caught up in looking into their future, that they kind of lose what's in front of them. Appreciate the smallest things, surround yourself with the things that inspire you and let go of the obsessions that want to take over your mind. It is a daily struggle sometimes and hard work, but happiness begins with your own attitude and how you look at the world. Live your dreams and take risks. Life is happening now.



*Figure 9.* 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." This quotation demonstrates that Faith was both able to recognize potential problems as they relate to her attitude while also demonstrating her ability to identify potential solutions to improve her attitude and mental health.

**Perseverance.** A resounding concept emerging from the data was the youths' perseverance. Bree reflected her views of perseverance through a photograph of a sunset. Bree discussed 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 10).



*Figure 10.* Bree's photograph of a sunset to represent perseverance.

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." This sentiment was echoed by Jazz who shared, "My life

is like a book. Some chapters are sad, some happy and some exciting, but if you never turn the page, you will never know what the next chapter holds.” Additionally, Shealynn maintained that the more people try to push her down, the more she resists, consequently making her stronger.

**Access.** Through the awareness demonstrated by participants of issues affecting mental and physical health, youth also recognized the necessity of greater access to resources. Although not discussed in great detail, an important finding in the data was 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 fixed because they become obstacles in obtaining necessary health and emergency services (see Figure 11).



*Figure 11.* Emily’s picture to represent lack of access to medical services.

## **Knowledge**

Indigenous knowledge is a way of life and requires those to “practice what you know and be what you do” (Abosolon, 2010). Although findings indicate that many participants value the importance of learning and gaining knowledge, they also 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 12).



*Figure 12.* Shealynn’s photograph representing a childhood spent outdoors.

Shealynn does speak Dené and has promised her sister that when her niece or nephew is born she will ensure they are fluent speakers of the Dené language, but it is also clear she wishes she had greater exposure to her language.

Similarly, Faith makes the distinction known by discussing what she values about education. Faith 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 13).



*Figure 13.* Faith’s photo of the importance of learning

Faith acknowledges the importance of referring both to her cultural learning and her educational in-class learning as separate, but valuable entities.

Two participants discussed technology and how it relates to education. Ashlynn warned against becoming addicted to technology for worry of it impeding on the student’s ability to learn in class. In contrast, Zach suggested the potential benefits of utilizing technological devices to support student learning – especially as it is associated with mathematics comprehension.

Although 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 who assist in classrooms, and frequent ‘culture days’ throughout the school year devoted to teaching about Dené culture while enjoying Dené cultural food, games, and activities, it is clear from the findings that the participants perceive cultural teaching and standard-curriculum teaching as two separate entities.

## Community/Culture

The importance of community and culture was also a theme that emerged from the data. Findings indicate that many of 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. Through her 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 come back 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 submitted a photograph to represent their recent Treaty Day on the local reservation. In their community, Treaty Day represents the signing of Treaty Eight in the summer of 1989 (Madill, 1986). As part of the signing of Treaty Eight, it was promised that a perpetual annuity of five dollars per band member would be given yearly (Madill, 1986). This pittance, which was never adjusted to reflect inflation continues to be provided to band members once yearly on what is now labelled Treaty Day. This obvious marker of colonialism, signified by a

federal agent travelling to the community to provide Indigenous band members with their allotted five dollars, has been transformed by community members to be a celebration of culture and community. Though treaty day occurs only one day per year, the festivities span over the course of three, and involve games for children, cultural dances and music, cultural food including moose meat and dried fish, and finish with a grand fireworks display.

Faith took the 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 14).



*Figure 14.* Faith’s photo of Treaty Day to represent Dené culture and community.

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 emerged across all themes. It seemed that this highly valued notion allowed participants to recognize and understand one's own history as a way to understand and plan for their future circumstances.

**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 15).



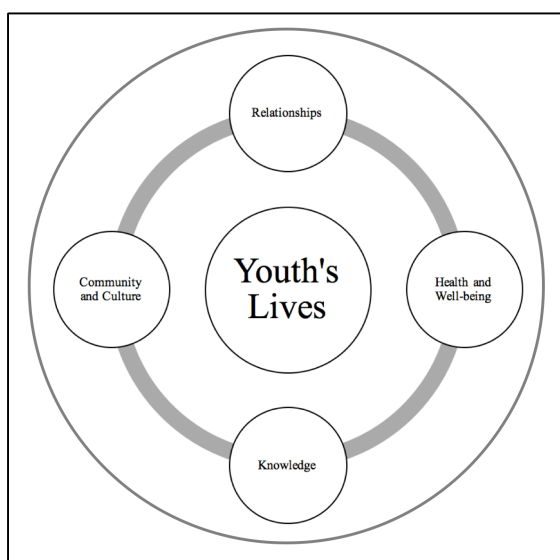
*Figure 15.* Harry's illustration to represent, “I want to make the community happy again.”

Interestingly, Harry did not attend the high school at the time of the shooting, but yet he demonstrated a love of his community by attempting to create a way to positively change his community. 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.

### Discussion

What became clear throughout the data analysis process was that the themes identified by the youth participants were not mutually exclusive and separate categories but instead 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.’ The themes are represented in a diagram demonstrating their connectedness, where the largest circle is the representation of the whole and the smaller circles represent the themes that emerged through the analysis process (see Figure 16).



*Figure 16. Thematic Data Analysis of Findings*



It is important to note that 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 flip between reminiscing on 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 past, present and 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 participants and to situate their ideas within the broader literature.

## **Relationships**

Within this section I will discuss the importance and centrality of relationships to Indigenous youth's lives as they arose from the data, and the connection to nature and the theme of 'no technology' as expressed by participants.

**Centrality of relationships.** The importance youth placed on relationships with family and friends is overwhelmingly clear. At first I was unsure of how to take note or include the significance of pets and nature. It seemed somewhat unorthodox that animals and surrounding environment should share the same category as that of human family members or friends. However, through the process of reading and re-reading the rich descriptions of the relationships youth had with animals and nature, followed by double checking participant narratives with the youth through member checking, it was evident that these categories belonged under the theme of relationships – and that it was actually the limitation of my own colonized, adult-centric perspective that prevented me from seeing it as such.

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 instead including their relationships with people, animals, and nature (Kirmayer, et al., 2003; Alfred & Corntasell, 2005). Youth spoke fondly of their relationships with people, animals and their connection to the land. They shared the joy and deep sense of kinship they received from their family members (their parents, grandparents, and siblings) their friends and their animals, they spoke of the comfort they received, and the responsibility they felt to care for those within their "kinship networks" (Alfred & Corntasell, 2005, p. 609). Alfred and Corntasell (2005) position relationships to be at the core of authentic Indigenous identity and explain that it is the need to maintain those 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 continue by saying 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. Therefore, relationships have a profound impact on the lives of community and are connected to all subsequent themes.

**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, it is not a surprising finding that participants would reflect the importance of the land in their testimonies; however, it came through so frequently that it 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 that it should be spent away from technology. I found this 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) (Lavallee, 2009; RCAP, 1996; Parlee et al., 2007; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009). This was illustrated through youth's representations of health – existing within 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). Only when we listen to the voices and perspectives of community members can we begin to address the needs of community members (Rappaport, 1995).

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 UNDRIP states that Indigenous individuals have a right to access all social and health services (UN General Assembly, 2007). Similarly, Article 24 of the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that no child should be deprived of their right to access health care services (UN General Assembly, 1989). Van Daalen-Smith however argued 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 call to action 18 of the TRC (TRC, 2015c), it is imperative that these laws and treaties be respected –and that resources be provided to adequately and promptly address this issue.

## **Knowledge**

In this study, participants revealed their value of learning and gaining knowledge – both within the classroom, and outside of it (specifically as it pertained to one’s own culture). Youth noted the benefits of each. They noted 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 (Greenwood, 2016). However, when speaking about education, participants 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 authentic cohesion between Dené and Métis cultural values, identity, and knowledge and provincially decided curriculum expectations (Sterzuk, 2008; Ball, 2004). Battiste (2011) refers to this refers to this prioritization and perpetuation of Euro-western knowledge over other forms of knowledge as cognitive imperialism and explains:

Cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values. Validated through one's knowledge base and empowered through public education, it has been the means by which whole groups of people have been denied existence and have had their wealth confiscated. Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference (p. 198).

This separation of Dené and Métis culture and Euro-Western academic learning can result in a myriad of learning difficulties in youth as there exists a noticeable power imbalance between home and school cultures as well as what is deemed ‘successful’ (Hermes, 2007; Sterzuk, 2008). Within this section, Shealynn shared that she worried when she began school that she might lose

her Dené language. Shealynn stated that she didn't want to go to school but she knew she should because she wanted "to go to Toronto and stuff." This quotation demonstrated the deep connection to language but also the potential belief that 'success' may mean 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, but that true success is 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). This is not a new concept, especially not for this community. In fact, the 1989 Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC), which represents nine first nations in close proximity to La Loche stated that they believe:

It will be children who inherit the struggle to retain and enhance the people's culture, language and history; who continue the quest for economic progress for a better quality of life; and who move forward with a strengthened resolve to plan their own destiny (as cited in Pence & McCallum, 1994).

This statement served as the impetus for the 1989 collaboration between the University of Victoria and MLTC to create an early childhood education curriculum inclusive of Cree and Dené First Nations cultures, while ensuring employment opportunities for community members

(Pence & McCallum, 1994). An assumption underlying this collaboration is that culturally valued and useful knowledge about childhood and care is rooted within the community and that this knowledge needs to be a central component in the development of curriculum for early childhood education (Ball, 2004). Additionally, Indigenous community members asserted throughout the partnership process that it was valuable to consider the perspectives and knowledge held by Euro-Western research and external professional experience (Ball, 2004). It was for this reason a partnership was formed and a pedagogical approach was created known as the “Generative Curriculum Model (Pence & McCallum, 1994, p. 115). This model minimizes the effect of universalist and generalized notions of learning by instead focusing on uncovering new community relevant knowledge sources from within the community and by creating new understandings through reflection and dialogue (Ball, 2004; Pence & McCallum, 1994). Though the collaboration had great success and many graduates of the program worked in a variety of child and family service roles in their own rural and remote communities years after the project was completed (Ball, 2004), this approach to curriculum was limited to early years education, and did not extend to include elementary or high school education. However, this could serve as a successful local model that could potentially be reworked to serve as a model in which to base the elementary education and high school education curriculums.

For most students, authentic 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 UNDRIP and in the TRC. Article 13 of the UNDRIP states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems, and languages” (UN General Assembly, 2007, p. 5). 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, call to action 10 of the TRC requests that the government draft Aboriginal education legislation with full participation and consent of Aboriginal peoples to develop culturally appropriate curriculum (TRC, 2015c). 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, to actualize this right, efforts must be made to ensure authentic experiences for youth to engage with their language and culture in their everyday lives and to ensure they are reflected in their education.

### **Community and culture**

The findings revealed that participants felt 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 in recent years has become the recipient of a great deal of negative commentary by media outlets – frequently viewing the community through a deficit lens. However, when youth in this study were provided



a space to speak of their community they did not speak in contemptible terms but rather they identified themselves as having great agency, hope for the future, and pride in where they are from.

This external viewing of a community through a deficit lens is not restricted to La Loche, but is reflective of a colonial state that has historically defined Indigenous communities and peoples based on deficit models (Tuck, 2009). In response to this, Tuck (2009) theorizes that we must instead engage in desire-centred approaches which account for the challenges that the community may face while centred around positive dimensions of lives lived well (Tuck, 2009).

Additionally, it has been found that when youth are afforded spaces to authentically contribute to planning initiatives within their community, they are able to self-represent in constructive ways that can disassemble popular stereotypes (Flicker et al., 2016), while providing the opportunity for youth to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of youth engagement – subsequently leading to an increase in youth collaboration in community projects (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). It is for these reasons that we must resist the urge and our own reliance on potentially problematic understandings and portrayals of cultures by their risk factors and negative events. Instead, spaces must be intentionally created to provide youth and community members the opportunity to share their opinions and views (Skovdal & Andreouli, 2011), especially when those views have been historically and systematically expunged. We must shift our lens of Indigenous communities and youth and see them as highly competent and capable experts in their own lives (Skovdal & Andreouli, 2011; Mayall, 2002; Weinger, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal that the youth participants were highly capable of identifying issues of importance and relevance to their lives. 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), and demonstrates that children and youth are not merely passive subjects of social structures (Prout & James, 1997) but rather they are competent social actors able to contribute to meaningful change in authentic ways (Skovdal & Andreouli, 2011). For these reasons it is imperative that Indigenous youth and communities are genuinely consulted and have a decisive voice in determining what programs, services, and supports are most suitable for their community's cultural context (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier & Peace, 2011).

The purpose of this project was to create a space for youth from La Loche, Saskatchewan to share their perceptions and insights into their lives. Article 12 and 13 of the UNCRC state that children have a right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, and that they must be given the opportunity to be heard in the administrative proceedings that may affect them (UN General Assembly, 1989). Similarly, as stated previously Article 18, 19, and 23 of UNDRIP state that Indigenous individuals have a right to participate in decision-making and inform policy that affect them (UN General Assembly, 2007). Listening to their voices is simply the first step, hearing and responding is another (Lundy, 2007). King, Wattam, & 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).

Furthermore, Canada is now situated within a "time of significant transformation" (Greenwood, 2016, p. 27), characterized by the heightened public pressure and specific attention

on the Government of Canada to take meaningful action to improve the life chances and living conditions for Indigenous peoples. This is not to say that we have arrived at an equitable society – we are still so very far from it, but as Greenwood (2016) so eloquently stated,

This gives us reason to hope, this gives us fuel to proceed, but in pushing forward we must remember that reconciliation cannot and will not be achieved if we continue to silence the voices of the population's most vulnerable citizens – those of its children (p. 18)

I am irrevocably connected to La Loche. This connection is not simply because of protocol set out regarding working with Indigenous communities, not solely because I believe for the TRC to be actualized that non-Indigenous Canadians must become settler-allies and begin to build strong relationships with our Indigenous neighbours, but because my life, my healing, my future, and my history is now intertwined with La Loche. 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), and adds 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 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, respectful, and authentic relationships with Indigenous youth and communities, and to recognize the sovereignty, the profound knowledge and expertise, and the great capacity of Indigenous youth and their communities to identify our nation's next steps. It is then the solemn responsibility of all others (including myself) to respond.

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Appendix A  
Statement of Apology – to former students of Indian Residential Schools (Harper, 2008)

The treatment of children in Indian Residential Schools is a sad chapter in our history.

For more than a century, Indian Residential Schools separated over 150,000 Aboriginal children from their families and communities. In the 1870's, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate Aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools. Two primary objectives of the Residential Schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child". Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.

One hundred and thirty-two federally-supported schools were located in every province and territory, except Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Most schools were operated as "joint ventures" with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United Churches. The Government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities. Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools. Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home.

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language. While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities.

The legacy of Indian Residential Schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today.

It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered. It is a testament to their resilience as individuals and to the strength of their cultures. Regrettably, many former students are not with us today and died never having received a full apology from the Government of Canada.

The government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation. Therefore, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this Chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian Residential Schools system.

To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, far too often, these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and we apologize for failing to protect you. Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry.

The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a Government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey.

The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

In moving towards healing, reconciliation and resolution of the sad legacy of Indian Residential Schools, implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement began on September 19, 2007. Years of work by survivors, communities, and Aboriginal organizations culminated in an agreement that gives us a new beginning and an opportunity to move forward together in partnership. A cornerstone of the Settlement Agreement is the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This Commission presents a unique opportunity to educate all Canadians on the Indian Residential Schools system. It will be a positive step in forging a new relationship between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, a relationship based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other and a desire to move forward together with a renewed understanding that strong families, strong communities and vibrant cultures and traditions will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us.

June 11, 2008

On behalf of the Government of Canada  
The Right Honourable Stephen Harper,  
Prime Minister of Canada

Appendix B  
Approval from Dr. Morten Skovdal to use research framework

On 15 March 2017 at 15:52, Caitlin Wood

Dear Dr. Morten Skovdal and Dr. Eleni Andreouli,

My name is Caitlin Wood and I am a student in the Master of Arts Early Childhood Studies program at Ryerson University (Toronto, Canada). Recently, through one of my courses, I came across your article *Using Identity and Recognition as a Framework to Understand and Promote the Resilience of Caregiving Children in Western Kenya (2011)*. I thought this paper brilliantly illuminated the many complexities experienced by those in marginalized communities due to the way the surrounding society views, and 'recognizes' these individuals - as well as the real effects these recognitions can have on a community's identity and resilience.

As a component of my program we are invited to complete a Major Research Paper. My proposed study will be taking place in a small Northern, predominately Indigenous town in Saskatchewan, Canada. This community has been the target of much media attention, and the topic of many provincial and federal political conversations and concerns within the last year. This means that there has been much said about, and decided upon on behalf of the community, but there has not always been an opportunity for community members to share their unique and important perspectives. My project aims to engage youth through photo-voice to share their perspectives and have their voices heard.

The reason I am writing to you both, is to inquire about the possibility of using the research framework presented in your article as a way to guide my own study. If you agree, I will include the proper citation for the use of your framework.

Although my study is not intended to be as large in scale, I would like to use your research questions: 1) 'What is your life like?', 2) 'What is good about your life?', 3) 'What makes you strong?' 4) 'What needs to change?' Followed by the clarifying questions, ' 1) I want to share this photo because...' 2) ' What's the real story this photo tells?' 3) How does this story relate to your life and/or the lives of people in your neighbourhood?'

I thoroughly enjoyed the article, and think it is an important piece of work.

Thank you for your time and considering my request.

Sincerely,

Caitlin Wood

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From: Morten Skovdal  
Subject: Re: Request to use research framework  
Date: March 15, 2017 at 11:13:41 AM EDT  
To: Caitlin Wood

Dear Caitlin,

Please do, and good luck with the study. It sounds fascinating.

Morten