Behind the Scenes of Youth-led Community Events: A Participatory Evaluation Approach Using Photovoice in a Canadian First Nation Community.

Halsall, T.G., and Forneris, T.

Abstract

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

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

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

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

In developing interventions to improve health and well-being in FNMI youth, researchers have advocated for the application of strengths-based strategies that account for contextual challenges and focus on positive development (Crooks et al., 2010a) and
empowerment (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer et al., 2003). Positive youth development (PYD) is an approach that conceptualizes youth development as being under the influence of internal and external factors (Benson, 1997) and places a focus on positive outcomes and the life events that lead to future success (Roth et al., 1998). PYD programming focuses on skill-building (Roth et al., 1998) and targets the enhancement of a range of outcomes such as the promotion of resilience, competence, positive identity and prosocial involvement (Catalano et al., 2004). Youth leadership development has been identified as an integral component of effective PYD programs (Lerner et al., 2006; Zeldin & Camino, 1999).

Sport for Development is an approach that utilizes sport to promote developmental outcomes (Kidd, 2008) and this approach has been applied to promote positive youth development within FNMI communities (Bruner, et al., 2016). There is an expanding literature base highlighting the promising positive impacts of sport PYD programs (Bean & Forneris, 2013; Bruner et al., 2016; Hayhurst, Giles & Radforth, 2015; Ritchie, Wabano, Russell, Enosse, & Young, 2014). The Youth Leadership Program (YLP), a program that is implemented by Right to Play, is an example of programming that applies this approach. The YLP is the focus of the evaluation research presented here.

Leadership has been defined as “a relational process combining ability (knowledge, skills, and talents) with authority (voice, influence, and decision making power) to positively influence and impact diverse individuals, organizations, and communities” (MacNeil (2006), p.29). However, Hellison and colleagues (2009) differentiate youth leadership as having a central focus on helping others and is not limited to roles of
influence; as such it is accessible to all youth and can be applied across contexts. With regards to youth leadership programming, Zeldin and Camino (1999) proposed that such programming should be comprised of the following three elements: “First and foremost, it is grounded in a social cause. Second, it seeks to promote a relatively narrow set of youth outcomes, specifically those that allow young people to engage in collaborative action. And third, programming incorporates not only instruction and action, but equally important, membership and modelling” (p. 10). Researchers have identified that there is a contrast between traditional definitions of leadership and FNMI perceptions of leadership (Jules, 1988; Julien et al., 2010). The FNMI concept of leadership highlights the importance of connection to the people, humility and service (Jules, 1988) as well as the use of collectivist and participatory strategies (Redpath & Nielsen, 1997). Researchers suggest that modern youth are in need of more opportunities that provide incremental preparation for the responsibilities of emerging adulthood (Benson, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000). Leadership programs may provide the opportunity to help bridge this gap. In his early work regarding the promotion of youth leadership, Hart (1997) describes the levels of youth-adult partnership development within his ladder of participation. His levels range from a baseline that describes an adult-led, manipulative format and ranges through to a fully participatory model that is initiated by youth.

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

Research and evaluation that applies a traditional methodological approach has promoted colonial hierarchies and exclusion, and has had detrimental impacts on FNMI communities (Absolon & Willett, 2004; LaFrance & Nichols, 2010). As a result, many FNMI people are apprehensive of researchers and reluctant to participate (Blodgett et al., 2011; Bennett, 2004; Boffa et al., 2011; Lafance, 2010; Smith, 2012). As such, it is useful to apply participatory strategies to enhance meaningful involvement and to promote community benefits.

YPE evolved from both the PYD approach and from participatory evaluation (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Flores, 2008) and has been described as, "an approach in which young people are active participants in the stages of knowledge development, including defining the problem, gathering the information, and using the results" (Checkoway, & Richards-Schuster, 2003, p. 22). Crooks and colleagues (2010a) suggested that YPE with FNMI youth creates the following benefits: enhanced ethical considerations of the research project, increased validity of data, increased relevance to community members, and the development of youth skills and interest.
Photovoice is another participatory approach whereby photos are used to empower participants to share their own perspective and to begin a dialogue from that outlook in order to later inform decision making (Wang & Burris, 1997). In part, photos facilitate data generation because they stimulate participant interpretation and meaning making (Harrison, 2002). Photovoice and photography-based research methods have been implemented successfully with FNMI youth and many examples of this approach exist within the literature (e.g. Jardine & James, 2012; McHugh et al., 2013; Pearce & Coholic, 2013; Young et al., 2013). Researchers have suggested that it is important to modify Photovoice in order to be adaptable to FNMI community needs and objectives (Castleden 2008). Modified Photovoice projects have been applied with FNMI youth, whereby methods were adjusted to better meet youth’s goals and capture their experience (see McHugh et al., 2013; Pearce & Coholic, 2013; Young et al., 2013).

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

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

Recognizing the potential contribution PYD programs can make within FNMI communities, as well as the possible relationship between leadership and positive youth outcomes, it is important to further explore these interventions. The purpose of this research was to contribute to the evidence on programming with FNMI youth by describing a youth participatory evaluation (YPE) of the Youth Leadership Program (YLP), a program that was designed to promote FNMI youth leadership and community development. The study presented in this paper was a part of a larger research project evaluating the preliminary outcomes and implementation of the YLP (Halsall & Forneris, accepted; Halsall & Forneris, in press) and focuses on a more in-depth examination of the youth-led community events within one participating community.

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

**Background**

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

The YLP runs throughout the school year (September to June) and applies an experiential learning model to promote youth leadership skills and community development. It is based on several components that include mentorship, weekly programming and the development of community events. Mentors for the program are community members who typically share the same cultural background as the youth. Hereafter the mentors are referred to as Community Mentors. Overall, the program philosophy is based on the inclusion of youth voice. This involves the inclusion of youth vision and agency in directing the program. Throughout the program, opportunities are provided for the youth to engage in decision making and to take responsibility for program activities. This study was undertaken in one sub-urban reserve located in
southern Ontario that was implementing the YLP program. In this community, the YLP program took place at the local community centre. The program typically ran for two to three hours, twice a week.

**Method**

**Sample**

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

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

**Procedure**

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

**Choosing the focus and approach**

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Participatory Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Joining all the games</td>
<td>• Skill level</td>
<td>• Helping and testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Getting involved</td>
<td>• Questionnaires</td>
<td>• Seeing how well you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not sitting out</td>
<td>• Tests</td>
<td>participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implementing the Photovoice exploration
The second workshop included a brief introduction to photography techniques, guidelines on how to capture photos safely (including an exploration of ethics and privacy issues) and a discussion about informed consent in preparation for the focus groups. The workshop began with a stakeholder analysis activity adapted from Flores (2008) called the reality wheel (p.76, see results provided in Table 2). This allowed the youth leaders to reflect on the overall program goals and to explore stakeholder involvement. From this activity, they developed a list of relevant stakeholders that was used within a later discussion of how to best communicate evaluation findings.
Table 2: Youth Leader Feedback Regarding YLP Stakeholders from the Reality Wheel Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Right to Play Program Stakeholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Program participants [the youth leaders]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frontline staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Community partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chief and Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Younger children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The partnering university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

After the game, the youth leaders participated in focus groups, one that discussed the Easter event, and the other that discussed community events in general. The concept of informed consent was reviewed and consent forms were collected. Focus group questions explored general event experiences (e.g. What did the participants think of the event?) and participation (e.g. Who normally attends these events? Who else should come out that isn’t coming yet?), positive event outcomes (e.g. How does the community benefit from the event? Why are these events important? What did you learn?) and possible ways to improve the events (e.g. How can we get more people
involved? What skills would you like to develop during future community events?).

Responses were audio-recorded and summarized on flipcharts during the discussions.

Examining ways to disseminate the findings

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

An early thematic analysis was initiated by the youth leaders through their interpretation of the meaning of their photos and the categorization of their feedback during the photo sharing game. These themes were then used to organize the remainder of the data from the interviews. Feedback was received from the Community Mentor regarding the accuracy of the results. To maintain the integrity of the youth voice and their experiences we have presented the photos along with all of the youth leader's original text while integrating quotes from the transcripts and post-it notes that help support the overall themes generated.
Authenticity
This research meets several criteria of quality, both through methodological approach and contribution. In relation to Tracy’s (2010) eight criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, this study exemplifies her concept of ethics, worthy topic and significant contribution. With regard to ethics, the methodological approach applied participatory strategies that were adapted to engage youth in the implementation of the research as well as in choosing the direction of the study goals. Participatory approaches have been identified as essential for fostering ethical considerations and maximizing participant and community benefits (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010; Smith, 2012). In light of the colonial impacts that affect FNMI youth and the severity of the issues this has created, the subject of this research is addressing a worthy topic. This research makes significant contributions both to the literature and to the community context. In contribution to the literature, it outlines a novel approach to getting FNMI youth involved in evaluation. This research contributes to the community context by providing practical program recommendations for a targeted audience. This element of the study is of particular importance as LaFrance and colleagues (2012) suggest that the validity of evaluation in indigenous communities be measured in terms of community contribution.

Results
Overall, the findings indicate that the youth-led community event provided an important and meaningful experience for all involved. The findings are organized into the themes that arose from the analysis of the photo exploration activities, focus groups and interview with the Community Mentor which include, (a) fun and fulfilling to engage the
children, (b) positive outcomes for youth leaders, (c) community impacts, (d) challenges and (e) opportunities for improvement. In Table 3, we provide some of the post-it note feedback shared during the photo sharing game.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences</th>
<th>Successes</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Opportunities for improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Kids were smiling left and right</td>
<td>• Everybody enjoyed the events hosted by RTP</td>
<td>• Behind on pancakes</td>
<td>• Make sure everyone isn’t busy the day of the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Community members come out and enjoy the festivities and food</td>
<td>• Good advertising</td>
<td>• Bunny getting attacked by children</td>
<td>• Involve more people outside the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We all come together</td>
<td>• The egg hunt was excellent</td>
<td>• Some youth didn’t come so it was harder to run</td>
<td>• Plan events that all ages will enjoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People helping with the pancakes</td>
<td>• Different gen[erations]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fun and Fulfilling to Engage the Children

Many of the youth’s photos focused on the children’s activities and captured positive experiences from the Easter event. One of the youth leaders attended the event as the Easter Bunny and this appeared to be a highlight for the children (Photo A1). For example, some of the youth leaders described the excitement that centred around the Easter bunny and the commotion it created, “They got to run around!”, “Scream and
chase each other”, “Bunch of kids running around, attacking the bunny tails, almost knocked down the Easter bunny.”

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

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

Photo A1: Meeting the Easter Bunny
Positive Outcomes for the Youth Leaders

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

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

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

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

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

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

![Easter Egg Hunt](Photo A4)

**Photo A4**: Easter Egg Hunt

**Community Impacts**

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

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

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

Although the Easter event was very well attended, an on-going challenge identified by the youth leaders was how to increase participation, both in their regular group meetings and at their larger events. The youth leaders talked about how they were often successful in generating attendance from the young children at the events, but that there were harder to reach demographics, such as the older teens and young adults,
“The little kids come back all the time.” “You always see the same people at all the events.” “Five to eight year-olds are always coming.”

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

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

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

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

The youth leaders talked about how their friends were also afraid to come to the reserve
and this kept them from attending youth program nights and events: “None of my friends
will come out anyway.” “So, how come they’re not coming out?” “Because my friends
don’t like coming to the reserve because they’re scared, I guess.”

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

Opportunities for Improvement
In terms of making changes to improve future events, the youth leaders came up with
many different ideas. Many of their ideas focused on ways to increase participation,
both in terms of total numbers, as well as engaging a larger diversity of age groups.
Some of their previous strategies had worked well for them and would continue to be
implemented, such as partnering with other organizations to enhance events, including
local celebrities and using social media to market the events. They considered some
new strategies, such as using local radio stations and posting flyers around the school.
Some of their ideas for advertising were more ambitious. The following is a suggestion
made by one of the youth leaders that describes sharing positive messages about the
program through television advertisement:
Posters aren’t enough, we need people extreme. Extreme meaning on television, getting people to air our advertisements… That would attract a lot of people, because they say good things about our program, then they’ll think about our event and go, ‘oh that must be really good’, so they’ll come out. They talked about creating targeted events that would be more interesting for people of the older generation. The youth leaders suggested organizing Bingo to attract the Elders: “We should run it for older people.” “Make it age appropriate.” “A senior bingo.”

Discussion

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

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

The findings indicated that the youth participants experienced many positive outcomes as a result of their participation, such as the development of practical skills and leadership capacity. Youth shared stories about experiencing increased engagement, confidence and life skills as a result of their participation. These results are consistent with another study involving youth from other communities participating in the YLP program (Halsall & Forneris, in press) that demonstrated that youth from several other communities’ perceived positive impacts related to confidence and life skills development. In other research, leadership programs have demonstrated to be effective for enhancing development for FNMI youth (Crooks et al., 2010b; Ritchie et al., 2014).

Our findings highlight the youth leaders’ positive perspectives regarding growth and development. Other research applying Photovoice methods with FNMI youth describe similar findings wherein youth participants’ maintained optimistic perspectives. In a project examining smoking behaviour in schools, a youth researcher working with Jardine and James (2012) suggested that they frame their findings in a more optimistic way by presenting healthy behaviours alongside findings about risky behaviours. This helped to shift the tone of their findings to a more positive perspective. In other research exploring the lived experiences of FNMI girls, findings demonstrated that participants were able to overcome challenges by recognizing their personal strengths and by relying on traditional teaching and cultural activities (Pearce & Coholic, 2013).
The YLP program is specifically designed to create positive impacts within the community and the results highlighted perceived community impacts from the youth-led event. Furthermore, the Easter event was estimated to have attracted 300 participants, which reflects a substantial turn-out considering that, based on government data, the estimated population on this reserve is just over 900. Findings from evaluations with other FNMI communities implementing the YLP indicated (Halsall & Forneris, in press) that community events create a greater sense of community and serve to strengthen partnerships, both formal and informal. Researchers have argued that civic contribution emerges as a result of healthy youth development and that this serves to perpetuate a mutual adaptive interaction between youth and their environment (Lerner et al., 2005). This has been substantiated in FNMI communities where researchers identified a relationship between increased community empowerment and decreased rates of youth suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Since this program is designed to enhance both youth and community development, it may have a stronger influence on both youth and community targets as a result of reciprocal interactions (Halsall & Forneris, in press).

The findings for this study may provide preliminary evidence of this relationship as the results highlight both youth civic engagement as well as community engagement.

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

The perceived barrier to attendance related to racism was primarily due to challenges in having people from outside the reservation come to the event. Similar to our findings, other researchers have identified that racism is a long-standing issue that affects FNMI youth and communities (Battiste, 2002; Baskin, 2007; Palmer & Cooke, 1996; Allan & Smylie, 2015; TRC, 2015b). More research is needed to examine how FNMI youth who are involved in community initiatives can decrease the barrier of racism to enhance or increase participation of individuals from outside of the community.

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

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

**Sharing the Findings**

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

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

**Strengths and Limitations**

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

Furthermore, LaFrance and colleagues (2012) put forth the argument that the value of an evaluation within indigenous communities should be based on its impact and contribution.

Although the methods used in this study exhibit several strengths, there were also some limitations. This study was accomplished over a very limited time frame. Time constraints are a common issue that has been documented in other Photovoice studies with FNMI youth (Jardine & James, 2012; McHugh et al., 2013). In our case, the short time frame was the result of the availability of open programming time. As such, it was not possible to implement this evaluation over a longer period of time which could have
created more opportunity for relationship building. Additionally, the focus group data with the youth leaders largely yielded brief answers that did not always provide a lot of context or description. This is consistent with the findings of McHugh and colleagues (2013). In our case, this may have been related to the youth leaders’ communication style. When one youth leader would provide an answer, the others would build on it, which did not allow a lot of space to elaborate on descriptions and experiences. Finally, beyond the analysis that was incorporated in the photo sharing activity, although the Community Mentor provided feedback about the themes, the youth were not involved more in-depth in that stage. This issue has been reported in other research with FNMI youth (McHugh et al., 2013; Hayhurst & Giles, 2015). Since the sample for this study was drawn from a community that was deemed to have a more successful program in operation than other communities, the findings may not be reflective of the experiences within other communities implementing the YLP. Finally, because the pace of this research lagged behind program operations, some of the findings were no longer applicable when they were presented back to the community. For example, one of the challenges that were identified at the time of the study was increasing participation of older youth, however, when the findings were presented during the knowledge exchange workshop, this had shifted and the program was then looking to draw in younger participants again. In the future, it would be useful to present quick practical recommendations that are based directly on youth perceptions shortly after data collection is completed. This can be followed by a more comprehensive report that discusses the implications related of these findings that are based on related literature.
Implications for Research and Practice

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

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

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

**Conclusion**

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

Acknowledgements: The community, Community Mentor, youth participants, Terry Swan, the Research Advisory Committee and Right to Play.

Funding: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Award Number 230682-160299-2001
References


positive youth development programs.

*Prevention & Treatment, 5*(15), 1-111.


participatory action research (PFPAR) approach to studying sport, gender and development programmes for urban Indigenous young women. *Sport in Society, 18*(8), 952–967.


