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Laughter yoga as embodied healing and educational well-being with Nishnawbe youth

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**Laughter Yoga as Embodied Healing and
Educational Well-being with Nishnawbe Youth**

by

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A portfolio submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This portfolio is based upon a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded Partnership Development Grant project entitled *Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project: Pedagogies of Repair and Reconciliation*. The project is focused on northern¹ First Nations² youth who have no choice but to leave their communities and families in order to “get an education” in the city of Thunder Bay’s high schools. This predicament continues because most far northern Ontario communities in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) do not have the funding or capacity to run community high schools, which has resulted in Nishnawbe³ or First Nations youth having to leave their homes to pursue secondary education. This dislocation from family, community, Land, and culture often subjects these youth to psychological isolation, racist abuse, and physical threats that can lead to serious mental illnesses, anxiety, depression, and educational disengagement. Based on the positive healing effects of a 3-day Land-based well-being retreat, this portfolio explores how the embodied approach of Laughter Yoga (LY) could be an effective school-based well-being strategy for Nishnawbe youth. This portfolio is a collection of six chapters: (1) an introduction to the project/portfolio; (2) a literature review; (3) the key components of the well-being retreat; (4) a multi-modal Prezi presentation (showcasing the retreat) that was presented at the Indspire National Gathering, including a personal reflection on the experience; (5) a conference poster presentation of my portfolio research that highlights the impacts that LY had on the Nishnawbe youth and; (6) a reflection on LY during the retreat.

¹ “Northern student” is the term that the school and school board employ for self-identified First Nations students who hail from distant, rural, or remote First Nations communities north of Thunder Bay and who are most often in boarding homes with parents and other family members at a great distance.

² In this portfolio, I use the term “First Nations” to distinguish from Métis and Inuit peoples. I use the term “Indigenous” to refer to all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth as a group.

³ Nishnawbe refers specifically to the youth who are part of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. Throughout this portfolio, Nishnawbe and First Nations are used interchangeably.

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There are a number of people I would like to acknowledge for their support and guidance throughout this experiential academic journey. First, I would like to thank my amazing supervisor, Dr. Lisa Korteweg for shedding light on Canada's hidden and shameful history and relations with its Indigenous Peoples. Her passion as a non-Indigenous ally towards reconciliation has moved and inspired me to continue on this journey. Her knowledge, guidance, commitment, and support are unparalleled.

Second, I would like to thank all of the Nishnawbe youth who took part in the project. Their desire for change is contagious. Their quest to re-discover their culture is admirable. I remain humbled by this experience and hope to continue to learn and grow alongside them.

Third, I would like to thank my committee member, Dr. Connie Russell for taking the time to consider my work and offer feedback and suggestions to improve this portfolio.

Finally, to Dr. Madan Kataria for creating Laughter Yoga. You have brought joy to millions of people around the world. Thank you for the inspiration.

Chi'miigwech. Do dze. Namaste. Domo arigatou gozaimasu.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all youth who are struggling.

Know that you are loved and that the future is bright if you open your heart.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Description of the Project

We have to question how we read and observe Indigenous youth's stories, values, actions, embodiments because it is extremely easy for non-Indigenous or university-based researchers to fall into "deficit" traps or assume an attitude that disadvantaged or marginalized students are disengaged or passive participants when their actions, behaviours or statements do not conform to preconceived notions of civic engagement, cultural strengths, or community resilience. (Korteweg & Bissell, 2016, p. 23)⁴

My portfolio project is based upon the Graduate Assistantship I completed with the *Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project: Pedagogies of Repair and Reconciliation*. This SSHRC-funded Partnership Development Grant (2013-2016) project out of the University of Windsor (PI: Dr. Yvette Daniel) crossed borders to include five sites from three countries, 30 youth researchers, 15 community organizations, and 10 university researchers from the fields of education and sociology. The objectives of this international youth project included the following:

(1) identify the places and resources to engage marginalized youth in youth-led advocacy for positive civic engagement; (2) explore the ways that these new understandings are translated into the youth's embodied experiences of civic engagement; (3) generate data to inform the development and mobilization of educational models to repair injustice through youth civic engagement; and (4) consolidate and expand our partnership to formal and informal educational institutions. (Daniel, 2016, p. 6)

To help support these objectives, the large Tikkun project was guided by the following questions: How do youth learn about civic engagement, become aware of social injustices, seek opportunities for civic engagement, understand the process of healing and reconciliation as integral to repairing injustices, and take leadership roles and responsibility for addressing perceived injustices in their communities?

The Thunder Bay/Lakehead University Tikkun site is focused on northern Nishnawbe youth who have no choice but to leave their communities and families in order to "get an

⁴ To ease readability, I have departed from standard APA practices by single spacing block quotations.

education” in this city’s high schools. “Getting an education” became an oft-repeated phrase by these northern Nishnawbe youth for this phase of their lives. “Getting an education” has become, for many, a rite of passage, either resulting in successful completion of secondary school before age 20 or dropping out and returning to their communities.

Dr. Lisa Korteweg is the Thunder Bay/Lakehead University Tikkun project lead researcher. In the early phase of the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project (2014-15), Lisa began building relationship capacity and partnerships with the following groups: two provincial urban school boards, The Native Child and Family Worker Program at Confederation College, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Deputy Grand Chief of Health and Youth, and the Ontario Provincial Advocate’s Office for Children and Youth, in particular, their Indigenous youth project, Feathers of Hope (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2014).

In the second phase (2015-2016), Lisa partnered with two youth leaders/role models from Confederation College. The two leaders, both trained in youth social work, ran informal drop-in sessions at four provincial high schools for one lunch-hour per week. These leaders volunteered to engage the Indigenous high school students in cultural activities, sharing circles, and raising awareness of unjust conditions in Thunder Bay, especially in regards to racism. This second phase concluded with two culminating events in spring 2016: a full-school powwow and a march/protest at Confederation College to “Stand Up” against racism (see Dixon, 2016).

In the third phase (2016-2017), the Tikkun-LU project focused on one provincial high school and collaborated with their Four-Directions Program for Indigenous youth. Lisa hired me to facilitate this collaboration because of my previous experiences working with/for youth. The vision was to take what was learned from phase one and two of Thunder Bay’s Tikkun project and synthesize this learning with the Four-Directions Program to create a more focused, effective

school-based approach to empower more Indigenous youth leadership, emphasizing “by youth, for youth” (see Korteweg & Bissell, 2015).

In 2016-17, we built ongoing relationships with this group of youth by visiting the high school every week for lunch-hour drop-in sessions and were supported and co-facilitated by the high school’s Indigenous Graduation Coach and FNMI Achievement Tutor. These sessions were held in the “Nish” room – a safe space for Indigenous youth to use during school hours. Any student was welcome to attend these sessions, and Indigenous youth were strongly encouraged to join by school staff. We did not miss a single week unless there was a field trip scheduled or a snow day. We then identified and recruited four outdoor experiential education teacher candidates from Lisa’s specialized Indigenous education course (ED4000-IPPE, for which I was the Graduate Assistant) and we focused on building authentic and strengths-based relationships with the youth in their school. The four teacher candidates took on the role of promoting well-being or being positive healing mentors and joined the lunch-time sessions to participate in play-based games, team initiatives, and sharing circle discussions with the youth, me, and Lisa.

After four months of weekly drop-in sessions at the high school, the four teacher candidates, Lisa, and I began collaborating with four northern Nishnawbe youth leaders, who were selected by the Indigenous Graduation Coach, the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) Achievement Tutor, and other school staff based on their desire for and commitment to leadership within their school community. The purpose of this collaboration was to deepen the relationships between the four youth leaders, the teacher candidates, Lisa, and me. This collaboration sought to strengthen their leadership capacity through play-based training so that they could encourage their peers and empower themselves towards embodied healing.

These weekly sessions during the fall and winter terms culminated in a three-day youth retreat. The retreat was co-facilitated by the Nishnawbe youth leaders, the teacher candidate healing mentors, and myself. An invitation to attend the retreat was sent out to all Nishnawbe youth at the high school. Fourteen additional youth were in attendance, along with four of the school's staff: one non-Indigenous staff member who is the local school board's FNMI Student Success Coach; one non-Indigenous staff member who is the FNMI Achievement Tutor; one Indigenous staff member who is the Indigenous Graduate Coach; and one non-Indigenous support staff. All four of the staff members were familiar with the youth who attended the retreat, and two of the staff members (the FNMI Achievement Tutor and the Indigenous Graduate Coach) had very strong relationships with the youth.

The retreat was Land-based, experiential, and focused on well-being. The purpose of the retreat was: to build positive healing relationships amongst the Nishnawbe youth, the non-Indigenous teachers, the teacher-candidate mentors, Lisa, and me; to provide a safe space for the youth leaders to develop a voice for self-advocacy; to empower the youth to become leaders and agents of change; to provide a safe space for healing; and to have the youth build confidence, pride, community, and relationships among themselves.

I have designed, led, and directed multiple youth camps during my time as director of Zen's Outdoor Leadership Camp for Youth (ZOLCY), a volunteer-driven Canadian not-for-profit organization that works with global underserved communities. ZOLCY's mission is to cultivate positive well-being through a variety of means: leadership development; diverse cultural perspectives immersion; group bonding through Laughter Yoga (LY) sessions; and a social-environmental justice orientation. I have used LY sessions as a method towards building

relationships, trust, and positive group cohesion among the volunteers and youth that participate in ZOLCY's programming.

A LY session is comprised of simulated laughter exercises that focus on the following:

(1) emotional wellness (pantomiming any action and adding laughter on top); (2) physical workout (aerobic training; balance, flexibility, mobility, resistance and strength training, and improving lung capacity); (3) playful behaviors (engaging in playful movements to help dissolve inhibitions); and (4) special techniques (cross-brain exercises; dancing and singing exercises; empowering behaviors and conversations; group games; floor exercises; laughter and ideokinesis; laughing alone; and laughter meditation). (Mora-Ripoll, 2011, p. 172)

My experience in facilitating LY with groups around the world has given me insight into the healing potential of laughter for emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being. Given these experiences, I was confident that this healing approach could be of assistance to northern First Nations and Nishnawbe youth in Canada and thus was keen to bring this approach to the Thunder Bay Tikkun project. I showed the teacher candidate mentors and Nishnawbe youth leaders how they could facilitate play-based learning initiatives, designed the three-day Land-based well-being retreat's programming and activities, and facilitated half of the well-being overnight retreat.

Significance of the Portfolio

The challenges to well-being that First Nations youth who must leave their communities face in pursuit of provincially funded education in urban centres can be traced and attributed to Canada's ongoing colonial education system (CESC, 2011; Gray, 2011; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Provincially funded education systems are still Eurocentric and an example of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2004) and the approach taken in these systems typically contradicts traditional Indigenous education. To put it succinctly, Eurocentric education puts far too much emphasis on standardized testing and compartmentalized learning rather than

on Indigenous methods of comprehending interrelated modes and ways of knowing (cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual) as a whole (Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Rico, 2013). According to Pidgeon, Munoz, Kirkness, and Archibald (2013), an Indigenous approach to educational programming should include “intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of development, for which growth can be demonstrated in a number of personalized, non-competitive, and inclusive ways” (p. 31). Neeganagwedgin (2013) further emphasizes the importance of this four-dimensional approach to traditional First Nations teaching and learning where the balance of “emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs” (p. 18) is always at the forefront.

An Indigenous approach to educational programming should be considered when developing and implementing well-being strategies/programs in the school environment. LY could be a useful well-being strategy that could be implemented in schools since those who participate in LY sessions have been shown to “experience its physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual benefits” (Moral-Ripoll, 2011, p. 60), which seemingly resonates with the four dimensions of First Nations teaching and learning.

Personal Background

I am a non-Indigenous, first generation half-Chinese Canadian. My personal story of falling victim to bullying and social exclusion resulted in many years of physical and psychological abuse. My 23 years of training and practicing in traditional martial arts and the discovery of LY have supported me during my identity and mental health struggles. It was incredibly challenging growing up “half-Asian,” living with a White mother in a predominantly White-privileged community. Additionally, I constantly struggled to find a sense of belonging as a “half-Caucasian” with my estranged Asian (Hong Kong) father and our cultural differences.

Embodied movement practices such as martial arts, LY, and movement meditation have been crucial in giving me the strength and perseverance to face everyday challenges, especially when living with Tourette's Syndrome, ADHD, and Intermittent Explosive Disorder, all undiagnosed until my late twenties. Given my own lived experiences, I can empathize with marginalized youth, especially those excluded from the mainstream and oppressed for their "othered" identities (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011) and the impacts on mental health and personal well-being of dis-ease from these oppressions (Elias et al., 2012).

I have adapted the embodied practices of martial arts and LY to engage children and youth in games, play, cooperation, laughter, and group challenges to not only experience positive group situations but to also feel greater self-esteem, belongingness, inclusivity, community, and joy. These qualities contribute to everyone's well-being and I would argue are particularly important for northern Nishnawbe youth attending urban "whitestream" (see Grande, 2003) schools that are still dominated by systemic conditions of (neo)colonialism (Battiste, 1998; Gray, 2011; Rico, 2013), ignorance of Indigenous ways of knowing (Godlewska, 2010; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Oskineegish, 2014), and erasure of Indigenous cultural identity (Gray, 2011; Rico, 2013).

Portfolio Tasks

Introduction to tasks. The purpose of this portfolio is to provide insight into the value of LY as an effective well-being strategy for Nishnawbe youth who must leave their northern communities to access high school education in Thunder Bay and to describe how it can be implemented into a school-based program. The portfolio includes three tasks: (1) a review of relevant literature; (2) a Prezi presentation that showcases the 3-day Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project's third year Land-based well-being retreat; and (3) a research poster presented at an

educational conference hosted by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE). The intended audience for this portfolio is other educators, support staff, social workers or counsellors, and educational organizations that work with/for Nishnawbe youth.

Task 1. Literature review. The literature review provides context for my work in exploring how LY can promote well-being for Nishnawbe youth. Qualitative studies of laughter are showing positive results in the field of healthcare (Berk, Felten, Tan, Bittman, & Westengard, 2001; Rosner, 2002) and, in tandem, there is literature emerging that focuses on healing and well-being from an Indigenous perspective (Blackstock 2008; Lavallee & Poole, 2010; Neeganagwedgin, 2013). There remains, however, a gap in the literature on how different mindfulness methods, such as LY, could be used as a well-being strategy for Nishnawbe youth contending with the harsh alienation of “getting an education” in urban, provincially-funded schools. Very few mindfulness initiatives exist in Canadian schools that are directed specifically towards Indigenous youth and it is not clear how focused teachers and high school programs are on the well-being of these often marginalized youth. Additionally, it is not clear whether the concept of LY would be received positively by school leaders, teachers, administrators, or families as a valid form of fostering well-being and healing with Indigenous youth.

The focus of my literature review will have two major strands: Indigenous youth well-being and Indigenous mental health, with a specific focus on northern Nishnawbe youth attending school in Thunder Bay; and holistic healing well-being strategies including laughter therapy, LY, and mindfulness. The latter portion of my literature review will bring these two strands together.

Task 2. Indspire National Gathering presentation. This task is a summary of the presentation that I co-presented at the largest national Indigenous education conference, Indspire, which is an organization dedicated to inspiring quality and excellence in Indigenous education

for Indigenous students. The national gathering conference of over 700 delegates was held in Montreal from November 29-December 1, 2017. The presentation's purpose was to provide an overview and showcase the 3-day Tikkun Land-based well-being retreat for Indigenous high school students. This task includes a Prezi presentation with photos from the well-being retreat and a 7-minute video that I created from video footage and photos taken during the weekend. Task 2 concludes with a reflective component that discusses my experience at the conference and some of the key attributes and features of the well-being retreat that I helped to design and deliver.

Task 3. Conference poster presentation. This task is a poster presentation that highlights the key findings of my portfolio research that I presented at the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) annual conference held at the University of Sherbrooke (Quebec) from June 19-22, 2018. The theme of the conference was "Pedagogical Innovation: Adapting Practice to Evolving Cultures" and my presentation was accepted under the conference thread "Teaching Practices to Support Experiential Learning." The poster highlights the work I have accomplished with the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project and this task also includes a reflective component.

Ethics Review

The research that informed this portfolio, including the use of photos and videos of all participants, was approved by both the University of Windsor and Lakehead University's Research Ethics Boards. The research was also cleared by the School Board's ethics officer and the high school principal. All students who participated in the 3-day Land-based well-being retreat were informed of, and gave consent for, their participation to be recorded, observed,

photographed, and filmed in order to contribute to this action-based research that seeks to improve northern Nishnawbe high school education in urban centres such as Thunder Bay.

My Approach to Youth Leadership and Well-Being

As a non-Indigenous educator, I have approached this Indigenous youth work with great humility, acknowledging that I am not an expert in Indigenous ways of knowing. Nevertheless, I believe that I can offer Indigenous youth a set of unique well-being facilitation skills and personal embodied experiences in somatic healing. In particular, I am well trained and have multiple experiences in conducting LY classes and programs with marginalized youth and children both in Canada and internationally.

I have done my best to establish good relationships with youth and maintain a relational accountability to respect and honour all those involved with the project (Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008). I have grounded my work within an Indigenous paradigm that “factors in a historical, colonial and power analysis” (Absolon, 2011, p. 55) and also have taken into consideration Indigenous worldviews, principles, and methodologies (Absolon, 2011). Hart (2010) discusses this importance of reciprocity in the context of the relational worldview as “honor(ing) our relationships with other life” (p. 7). Building relationship capacity with any group of people, whether in the context of family, community, work, or as an educator, is crucial for well-being education. Laughing with others is communal and spiritual – it connects people with each other, themselves, and their environment. The embodied practice of LY can be viewed as a form of meditation or spiritual practice in which the participants connect with the present moment while honouring themselves and each other. This type of well-being education is particularly important with Indigenous youth who have for too long been relegated to the sides or marginalized in education contexts, particularly given the legacies of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system.

As a non-Indigenous youth leadership and well-being facilitator, I take my settler responsibilities to decolonize and indigenize my practices all the more seriously when working with northern Nishnawbe youth.

Definitions of key terms

Below is a list of key terms and concepts that appear within this portfolio. These definitions will assist the reader in gaining a clearer understanding of the topics that are discussed in the three tasks.

Cognitive imperialism. As stated by Battiste (2005), cognitive imperialism “denies people of their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference” (p. 12). The domination of the English language and European worldview in the school system has denied cultural minorities access to their knowledge systems and worldviews, maintaining an assumption that the English language, culture, and worldview is the superior form of knowledge and way of thinking (Battiste, 2004, 2005).

Embodied. As Biasetti (2015) explains, “to be embodied means to live through the sense door. It means to engage oneself in the world through the experiences we feel in our body, through our body, and perceived through our body” (para. 3).

Eurocentric/Eurocentrism. Viewing and interpreting the world within a European worldview (or lens) and values system.

Eurocentric education. The dominant discourse in the Canadian education system views and interprets the world from a European worldview and way of thinking. Eurocentric education emphasizes standardized testing and compartmentalized learning (e.g., the grading system and

specialized subjects), in contrast to Indigenous methods of comprehending systems as a whole (Neeganagwedgin, 2013).

External colonialism. According to Tuck and Yang (2012):

External colonialism denotes the expropriation of fragments of Indigenous worlds, animals, plants and human beings, extracting them in order to transport them to - and build the wealth, the privilege, or feed the appetites of - the colonizers, who get marked as the first world. This includes so-called 'historic' examples such as opium, spices, tea, sugar, and tobacco, the extraction of which continues to fuel colonial efforts. This form of colonialism also includes the feeding of contemporary appetites for diamonds, fish, water, oil, humans turned workers, genetic material, cadmium and other essential minerals for high tech devices. External colonialism often requires a subset of activities properly called military colonialism - the creation of war fronts/frontiers against enemies to be conquered, and the enlistment of foreign land, resources, and people into military operations. In external colonialism, all things Native become recast as 'natural resources' - bodies and earth for war, bodies and earth for chattel. (p. 4)

Indian Act. According to the Canadian Encyclopedia (2006):

The Indian Act is the principal statute through which the federal government administers Indian status, local First Nations governments and the management of reserve land and communal monies. It was first introduced in 1876 as a consolidation of previous colonial ordinances that aimed to eradicate First Nations culture in favour of assimilation into Euro-Canadian society...The Indian Act pertains only to First Nations peoples, not to the Metis or Inuit. It is an evolving, paradoxical document that has enabled trauma, human rights violations and social and cultural disruption for generations of First Nations peoples. The Act also outlines governmental obligations to First Nations peoples, and determines "status" – a legal recognition of a person's First Nations heritage, which affords certain rights such as the right to live on reserve land. (para. 1-2)

Indian. The origin of this term is believed to date back to Christopher Columbus who thought he had arrived in Asia, specifically India (Joseph, 2018). Although this term is considered offensive and out-of-date, it is still of legal significance in Section 35(2) of Canada's Constitution Act which refers to the "Indian Act" (Joseph, 2018).

Internal colonialism. According to Tuck and Yang (2012), internal colonialism is:

The biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the "domestic" borders of the imperial nation. This involves the use of particularized modes of control - prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing - to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite. These modes of control, imprisonment, and involuntary

transport of the human beings across borders - ghettos, their policing, their economic divestiture, and their dislocatability - are at work to authorize the metropole and conscribe her periphery. Strategies of internal colonialism, such as segregation, divestment, surveillance, and criminalization, are both structural and interpersonal. (p. 4-5)

Mental health. Refers to the quality of individuals' "overall well-being that includes their capacity for self-actualization, their ability to cope with everyday stresses, their ability to engage productively in working life, and their ability and desire to contribute to community" (Chan, 2018, p. 97).

Mindfulness. The concept of mindfulness is derived from Zen Buddhism and refers to the act of being present and aware (Brown, 2013). Mindfulness is a form of mental training that "teaches the practitioner how to disconnect with negative emotions, thoughts, and mental distractions that allows a state of inner peace to be achieved" (Chan, 2018, p. 98).

Settler colonialism. Settlers arrive "with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5).

Systemic racism. This term refers to the complex intersection and overlap of racism in social institutions, structures, and relations that is embedded within the fabric of society that benefits whites and the continuation of white privilege at the expense of people of colour (Feagin & Bennefield, 2014).

Well-being. Within the context of this portfolio, well-being refers to the positive aspects of an individuals' mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social domains.

Whitestream. This term refers to the idea that mainstream society and culture is predominantly framed around the white, Anglo-Saxon "middle-class experience; a discourse that serves their ethno-political interests and capital investments" (Grande, 2003, p. 330).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Canadian youth are increasingly at risk for mental distress and other mental health-related concerns (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Herman & Jane-Llopis, 2005; Murnaghan, Morrison, Laurence, & Bell, 2014). The risk is even greater among Indigenous youth who often face higher rates of substance abuse, sexual abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation than non-Indigenous youth (Dell & Lyons, 2007; Elias et al., 2012; Kumar, 2016; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016). According to researchers, these psychological issues are associated with the social stigma and discrimination against Indigenous youth that is indicative of colonialism (Elias et al., 2012; Macdonald & Wilson (2016).

Laughter therapy is a form of alternative intervention that has gained recognition by doctors and nurses in the treatment of patients' overall well-being (Kim et al., 2015). Recent studies have indicated that the body's physiological response to laughter-based interventions can decrease stress, depression, and anxiety, while also increasing self-esteem and quality of life (Dunbar et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2015; Louie, Brook, & Frates, 2016; Mora-Ripoll, 2010, Rosner, 2002).

In this literature review, I discuss issues related to the mental health, well-being, and healing with Nishnawbe youth. First, I describe the impact that mental illnesses are having on Canada's youth. Second, I explain the effects of colonialism on Canada's First Nations Peoples and how that has led to the educational inequities and risks that Nishnawbe youth face in the city of Thunder Bay. I illustrate these inequities and risks by discussing the tragic deaths of seven Nishnawbe youth in Thunder Bay, referred to as the "Seven Fallen Feathers" and the National Inquiry into Canada's Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). I then explore what mental health means from an Indigenous perspective. Next, I provide an overview

of research on laughter and explain the physiological and psychological benefits of laughter as healing. I explain what Laughter Yoga (LY) is and the benefits that a school-based LY program could have on embodied healing, enhanced learning, and relationship capacity building for Nishnawbe youth. I conclude by pointing to the similarities between LY and mindfulness-based therapy.

Mental Health

More than ten percent of youth worldwide are afflicted by severe mental illnesses (Cheng, 2016). In Canada, education policymakers and school administrators are observing rising rates of stress that are resulting in a higher prevalence of negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression, and behaviours like violence and bullying (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Rempel, 2012). These emotions and behaviours are impacting students' school engagement and academic performance (CESC, 2011; Murnaghan, Morrison, Laurence, & Bell, 2014; Richards, 2014). Many mental illnesses, such as depression, if untreated and severe, can lead to suicide, which is the second leading cause of youth mortality in Canada (Sampasa-Kanyinga, Roumeliotis, & Xu, 2014). Suicide rates are an alarming five times higher for First Nations youth between the ages of 10-29, the highest rate of suicide of any group in Canada (Kumar, 2016; White, 2016). According to the First Nations Information Governance Centre (2014), these rates are ten times higher for First Nations youth who live on reserves, particularly in remote or northern communities.

The Effects of Colonialism on Canada's First Nations Peoples

Researchers have found that First Nations youth have a higher documented rate of substance abuse, sexual abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation than non-Indigenous youth (Dell & Lyons, 2007; Elias et al., 2012, Kumar, 2016; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016). Many of these

problems have resulted from Canada's history of colonialism (Elias et al., 2012; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016; Pidgeon et al., 2013). An example of this is the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the loss of land as a result of forced relocation by the Canadian government (Dell & Lyons, 2007; Kumar, 2016; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016). Elias et al. (2012) illustrates these colonial impacts, saying, "In one century, the Government of Canada exposed tens of thousands of indigenous children to a system fraught with structural and systemic problems, impacting their well-being and that of their families, communities and future generations" (p. 1561). These systemic problems have resulted in Canada's child welfare system being overwhelmingly occupied by Indigenous children; half of all children in foster care are Indigenous (Gray, 2011; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016). As a result, a report under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child has concluded that the Government of Canada has failed its obligation to support the overall well-being of its Indigenous children (Rico, 2013).

Educational Inequities that Impact First Nations Youth in Thunder Bay

Canada's policies of colonialism continue to this day as many First Nations youth have no way of accessing secondary schooling except by leaving their reserve communities, usually after grade eight, to attend provincially funded schools (Richards, 2014) in urban centres. Richards (2014) states that approximately 40 percent of First Nations youth must leave their homes for high school. This is because many northern Ontario communities do not have the funding or capacity to have a high school in their community, while their elementary schools are seriously underfunded by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) (CESC, 2011; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Talaga, 2017).

Youth who leave their communities to attend high school must cope with being separated from their communities, families, and friends. The dislocation of moving to an urban,

predominantly White community, often alone and without peers or family members, brings intense loneliness and isolation (CESC, 2011; Neeganagwedgin, 2013). Unfortunately, the repercussion of this dislocation from community subjects these youths to more psychological isolation, racist abuse, and physical threats than non-Indigenous youth (Richards, 2014; Talaga, 2017). These negative social consequences often lead to mental illnesses, anxiety, depression, and educational disengagement that can contribute to the incompleteness of their secondary credits (Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Richards, 2014).

In sum, the severity of risk to Nishnawbe youth's mental health and safety can be attributed to the challenges they face in order to access and pursue a regular high school education, or as Nishnawbe youth refer to it, in "getting an education" (CESC, 2011; Richard, 2014). The dislocation of these youth in "getting an education" has resulted in the situation that led to the Ontario Coroner's inquest into the deaths of seven Nishnawbe students in Thunder Bay – the largest Coroner's inquest in Ontario history (Talaga, 2017).

Thunder Bay's "Seven Fallen Feathers": Ontario's Largest Coroner's Inquest

One of the urban centres to which Nishnawbe youth move to attend secondary schooling is the city of Thunder Bay. Students have the choice to attend the Catholic school board or the public school board. As well, in an effort to take control of their children's education and well-being, the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) established Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFCHS) in Thunder Bay, opening its doors in October of 2000 to Indigenous youth from many of the surrounding (mostly fly-in) northwestern Ontario communities (Talaga, 2017). It is important to mention that DFCHS is not a provincially funded high school nor is it run by a church nor is it closely monitored by INAC; rather, it is "an Indigenous-run private school" (Talaga, 2017, p. 98).

DFCHS is supported and funded by NNEC and the many Sioux Lookout District First Nations that send their youth to DFCHS (Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, 2014). From 2000 to 2011, seven Nishnawbe youth, now referred to as the “Seven Fallen Feathers,” who flew hundreds of kilometers from their communities and families, died while visiting the city of Thunder Bay; five of their bodies were found in rivers around Lake Superior (Talaga, 2017). These seven deaths led to an eight-month-long national coroner’s inquest where “three of the five river deaths could not be explained” (Macdonald, 2017, p. 42). Upon discovery of each of the bodies that were found in the rivers, the Thunder Bay Police Department (TBPD) “made the same assessment, hurriedly classifying them not as hate crimes but tragic accidents” (Macdonald, 2017, p. 42). It has become apparent that the TBPD failed in their duty to protect the city of Thunder Bay’s most vulnerable, which continues to increase the racial tensions and distrust between the TBPD and Indigenous people (Macdonald, 2017; Talaga, 2017).

Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)

The issues of systemic racism and incompetency of the TBPD have put the city of Thunder Bay in the national headlines (Macdonald, 2017; Talaga, 2017). It is evident that Canada’s history of colonialism has had profound negative consequences on its Indigenous People, including systemic racism within Canada’s government, educational system, and police force (Battiste, 2004; Elias et al., 2012; Mole, 2016; Talaga, 2017). Another unfortunate consequence of colonial impacts has recently forced the Prime Minister of Canada to launch a commission in September of 2016 to inquire into the systemic, ongoing violent tragedy of immense numbers of casualties and disappearances of Indigenous women and girls (Government of Canada, 2016). In 2015, the number of MMIWG, according to the Royal Canadian Mounted

Police (RCMP), was 1,017; many activists have suggested that this number is likely more around 4000 (Moll, 2016) and growing.

The lack of serious attention to MMIWG by the RCMP is another cause of deepening Indigenous people's distrust of police that further illustrates the systemic issues of neo-colonialism and racism that grips Canada's governmental and political institutions (Smylie & Cywink, 2016). Many stories from the families of the MMIWG have described "the indifference shown by law enforcement" (Savarese, 2017, p. 166) after they reported their daughter(s)/sister(s) as missing. The injustices of Canada's judicial system have chronically failed Indigenous women by "denying them fairness, accountability, and appropriate representation" (Savarese, 2017, p. 180).

Both the National Inquiry into Canada's MMIWG and the inquest of the "Seven Fallen Feathers" have illuminated the serious challenges that Canada's Indigenous populations face, and the impacts this has on mental health, including on Nishnawbe youth who move to Thunder Bay to attend secondary schooling (Smylie & Cywink, 2016). When one examines these issues, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that Canada does not sound like a country based on human dignity, equity, and freedom, but is rather a country steeped in neo-colonialist racism, mistrust, and social injustice. My work seeks to be part of redressing this problem through attending to the mental health needs of Indigenous youth.

Mental Health from an Indigenous Perspective

The concept and meaning of health has been rooted within the dominant colonial medical model that focuses primarily on the absence of physical illness or disease within an individual, rather than the overall context of their well-being (The Assembly of First Nations, 2015). Fortunately, this model of health has been shifting towards a model of "wellness," aligning more

closely with a First Nations approach as defined by The Assembly of First Nations First Nations (2015) as “a common understanding of the interconnectedness between the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual realms” (p. 3). This approach to wellness is derived from the teachings of the Medicine Wheel used by the Algonquin and Ojibwe Nations that views a healthy state of being as the balance of these four interconnected domains (Blackstock, 2008). Additionally, Lavelle and Pool (2010) further explain this holistic approach towards well-being within the context of Indigenous knowledge:

The mental realm refers to the mind and/or intellect, not the Western definition of *mental health*. The four realms cannot be understood separately and the Western concept of mental health can only be understood in relation to physical, mental/intellectual, emotional and spiritual well-being. Sickness begins with the spirit, if the spirit is wounded – because of the principle of interconnectedness – the mind, emotions and body become sick... True healing includes reestablishing a balance between the four realms. (p. 274)

In conclusion, a successful intervention strategy/program directed towards Nishnawbe youth healing must take a holistic approach that focuses on reestablishing harmony between the four domains of an individual, their relationships to others, and their relationships to the Land (Blackstock, 2008).

Laughter

Laughter is a universally shared feature of nonverbal communication that is common to all human groups throughout the world (Dunbar et al., 2011). Laughter occurs particularly in the context of social interactions, including play, and has been used as a form of physiological and psychological therapy for the past millennia (Bennett et al., 2014; Berk, Felton, Tan, Bittman, & Westengard, 2001; Dunbar et al., 2011). As a form of social interaction valued in many Indigenous groups around the world, laughter has been part of communal storytelling (Ballick & Lee, 2003). An illustration of this is from the Alaska Native Peoples whose cultural values

acknowledge laughter as “good medicine” and “healing” that contributes to a state of positive well-being (Cueva, Kuhnley, Lanier, & Dignan, 2006). The use of laughter, like communal music-making and dancing, has therefore been recognized as integral components of community bonding within these Indigenous groups (Dunbar et al., 2011).

The Physiology and Psychology of Laughter

The positive physiological and psychological affects of laughter have been recognized and reported in the fields of geriatrics, oncology, critical care, psychiatry, rehabilitation, rheumatology, and hospice care (Berk et al, 2001; DeCaro & Brown, 2016; Hasan & Hasan, 2009; Rosner, 2002). Indeed, health care practitioners have begun to recognize the importance and value of laughter therapy as a promoter of well-being for both patients and caregivers (Rosner, 2002). Moreover, it has been well documented and established that laughter therapy reduces depression, anxiety, stress, and fatigue, while also improving immunity, quality of life, happiness, self-esteem, and resilience (Bennett et al., 2014; Heo, Kim, Park & Kil, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Nasr, 2013).

These physiological and psychological health benefits are achieved because the effects of laughter involve the “muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and central nervous systems” (Rosner, 2002, p. 434). It is the physical act of laughing that stimulates and triggers the activation and release of endorphins (Cueva et al., 2006; Dunbar et al., 2011).

Dunbar et al. (2011) explain the role of endorphins further by stating that:

Endorphins are a class of endogenous opioid peptides produced in the central nervous system (CNS) that not only function as neurotransmitters but also play a crucial role in the management of pain through their analgesic properties: b-endorphin, in particular, appears to play a critical role in buffering the organism against the effects of physiological and psychological stress. (p. 1161)

Additionally, the act of laughing increases natural killer (NK) cells and activates T-cells in our bodies both of which assist the body in fighting infection and strengthening immunity (Hasan & Hasan, 2009; Rosner, 2002). To summarize, the act of laughter can have profound positive impacts on an individual's physiological and psychological well-being. Therefore, the promotion of laughter is one strategy that can be introduced to promote an overall sense of well-being, hence the creation of LY.

Laughter Yoga (LY)

LY was founded in Mumbai, India in 1995 by Dr. Madan Kataria (MacDonald, 2004). LY clubs have since been established all over the world as a supplementary and/or preventative therapy to achieving an overall state of well-being (DeCaro & Brown, 2016; MacDonald, 2004). In a LY session, laughter is initiated through laughter exercises and play. It is vital to mention that LY does not rely on humour or jokes to evoke spontaneous laughter to be successful. Rather, it is the combination of laughter exercises (simulated laughter), yogic breathing techniques, and the ability to allow yourself to let go and play that makes this practice successful. Spontaneous laughter requires some form of humour as a stimulus to be effective, whereas simulated laughter only requires the will to laugh and is not dependent on humorous stimuli (DeCaro & Brown, 2016). It has been stated that the human body cannot differentiate real laughter and simulated laughter, and so the same health benefits can still be achieved provided that the participant is willing to engage and “let go” of their inhibitions.

I will conclude by saying that, from my own personal experiences, I have found that one must actually participate in a LY session to be fully convinced of its benefits. No amount of reading about LY can do it justice. I thus recommend an experiential and embodied approach to learning about LY. Based on my experiences and the literature that I have reviewed, I believe

that the embodied approach of LY as healing could be an effective school-based well-being strategy for Nishnawbe youth. LY can facilitate healthy relationships among learners and teachers by breaking down barriers through laughter and play (Savage, Lujan, Thipparthi & DiCarlo, 2017). Additionally, LY could be a catalyst in providing greater student success and an overall positive school climate (Cuvea et al., 2006).

Laughter to Enhance Learning and Build Relationship Capacity

Introducing laughter into the classroom can enhance and energize the teaching and learning process while simultaneously creating a safe and inclusive environment for both teacher and learner (Cuvea et al., 2006; DeCaro & Brown, 2016; Savage et al., 2017). Studies have shown how laughter can improve memory retention, creativity, divergent thinking, and positive attitudes, while also promoting mental relaxation and a decrease in anxiety and stress within a learning environment (Cuvea et al., 2006; Heo et al., 2016; Mora-Ripoll, 2010). As a result, teachers are better able to meet curriculum goals and expectations, while also supporting the growth of relationships within the classroom environment (Savage et al., 2017).

According to the First Nations Health Authority (2015), a foundation towards positive health and well-being for First Nations youth is dependent on the capacity towards building relationships among “Nations, Family, Community, and Land” (p. 15). In addition, Hart (2010) discusses the importance of honouring relationships with all of life. Laughing with others can be communal and spiritual as it connects people with each other, themselves, and their environment (Mora-Ripoll, 2010; Rosner, 2002). The embodied practice of LY thus can be viewed as a holistic form of therapy and meditation (MacDonald, 2004) where interpersonal skills and relationships are improved by means of social bonding through play (DeCaro & Brown, 2016; Dunbar et al., 2011; Mora-Ripoll, 2011). Mora-Ripoll (2010) found that the therapeutic value of

laughter “builds group identity, solidarity, and cohesiveness” (p. 58), which illustrates the potential for laughter to create or enhance a sense of belonging and identity among Nishnawbe youth who participate in a LY session.

Laughter Yoga as Mindfulness-Based Therapy

Several mindfulness-based therapy (MBT) programs have been developed and established to promote mindfulness as a means to treating a variety of mental health illnesses, including depression and anxiety (Smith-Carrier et al., 2015; Van Vliet, 2017). The mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program, one of the most widely recognized and accepted MBT programs, was created by Jon Kabat Zin, a medical professor and Zen Buddhist practitioner (Van Vliet, 2017). According to Greenberg and Harris (2012) and Meiklejohn et al. (2012), school-based mindfulness programs have proven to be an effective strategy for building resilience and promoting well-being in youth. Moreover, research has found that school-based mindfulness programs for underserved/at-risk youth can support emotional regulation, the building of interpersonal skills, the promotion of inner well-being, and learning (Eva & Thayer, 2017; Mendelson et al., 2010). In fact, many schools have now incorporated mindfulness programs as a strategy to help support students with the management of depression and anxiety (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Rempel, 2012). Not only can a school-based mindfulness program help support students, but also teachers (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). According to Meiklejohn et al. (2012), such programs can increase occupational engagement and promote positive teacher-student relationships, while improving teachers’ overall well-being by decreasing occupational stress, burnout, and absenteeism.

On the other hand, some studies have shown that engaging youth in mindfulness practices can be challenging because of lack of interest from youth learners (Smith-Carrier et al., 2015;

Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Therefore, it has been suggested that a successful school-based mindfulness program should incorporate a variety of active and embodied movements to obtain maximum benefits (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008; Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2005). A school-based LY program as an embodied movement well-being practice could be a viable solution, and one I sought to pilot as part of the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project. This pilot is described more fully in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: Key Components of the Tikkun Land-Based Well-being Retreat

The core design of the Tikkun Land-based retreat was augmented by my experiences as the director and co-founder of ZOLCY. I have facilitated nearly a dozen 4 or 5-day retreats/camps with marginalized youth from Riverton, Jamaica. Riverton is one of Kingston's designated land-fill sites and an area that houses thousands of impoverished families. The Jamaican youths' social, economic, and emotional situations are similar to that of many Nishnawbe youth who come from northern communities. Thus, I thought that some of the key components that were successful during the ZOLCY Jamaica camps would likewise be successful for the Tikkun Land-based well-being retreat. In this chapter, I discuss the key components that I brought to this retreat: the mentorship process and Leader in Training (LIT) program; "back-pocket games" or icebreakers; team initiatives; sharing circles (in Jamaica we called these "cabin circles" but the concept is similar); and LY.

The Mentorship Process

Cook (2018) states that happy and healthy people are those who have a high level of well-being, with the leading contributor to well-being linked to having autonomy over decisions that affect one's livelihood. According to Cook (2018), then, wellness is located in self-determination. Because many northern Nishnawbe youth have little choice but to move to Thunder Bay to "get an education," they are often stripped of their agency, that is, their autonomy and self-determination. Our approach to wellness and well-being aligned closely with Cook's (2018) philosophy of self-determination where the Nishnawbe youth were given the opportunity to take the lead and choose what they wanted to do during the retreat. An example of this is the youth-led games and team initiatives.

The development of the mentorship model for the Indigenous Youth Tikkun Project was designed to empower the four Nishnawbe youth whom we were working with/for so that they could re-claim their self-determination to become role-models for their Indigenous peers. To facilitate self-determination, I created a LIT Program, based on the program that I designed and implemented with/for youth leaders in Jamaica. The purpose of the program was to help the four youth leaders develop the skills and resources that they needed to assume the role of youth advocate for the Tikkun Land-based well-being retreat. I created a LIT manual to help support this transition and focused on three objectives: (a) understanding the goals and objectives of the Tikkun Youth Project; (b) understanding team initiatives; and (c) learning how to facilitate groups of people. These objectives were achieved during the final four drop-in sessions that involved the four youth leaders, the four teacher-candidates, Lisa, and me. During these final sessions, the youth leaders and teacher-candidates were paired together and the teacher-candidates took the role of youth mentors. Each pair worked together to learn how to facilitate games, initiatives, and sharing circles. The purpose of the pairing was to help build a cohesive and meaningful relationship and support system for both the teacher-candidates and youth leaders.

During the first of four weeks, I ran games and team initiatives with the group of eight to help them become more comfortable with each other. (These games and team initiatives are described below). The second week was spent on a session on “The Art of Facilitation” that I taught and also wrote up and included in the LIT manual. During this session, the group learned how to teach and facilitate a game and a team initiative. During the third week, each pair practiced facilitating a game and an activity with each other. The fourth week was devoted to the logistics of the retreat, with explanations of how the retreat was going to look and what their

roles and responsibilities would be. The goal of the final drop-in sessions was to support and strengthen the youth leaders' confidence and leadership abilities through play-based training so that they could encourage their peers, while empowering themselves, towards embodied healing through self-determination. The role of the teacher-candidates in each phase was to help support their youth leader teammates since each pair would later lead 1-2 games or activities and facilitate sharing circles each night of the retreat. The four youth leaders were able to "showcase" their skills and role as leaders during the Tikkun Land-based well-being retreat.

The Activities of the Tikkun Indigenous Land-based Well-Being Retreat

As a reminder, the purpose of the retreat was to build positive healing relationships; to provide a safe space for the youth leaders to develop a voice for self-advocacy; to empower youth participants to become leaders and agents of change; to provide a safe space for healing; and to build pride, community, and relationships among the youth. These were achieved through games, team initiatives, and other activities such as LY. The role of the youth leaders, who were supported by their teacher-candidate mentor and myself, was to help facilitate the games, team initiatives, and sharing circles with their peers. These activities focused on non-verbal communication, leadership development through collaboration, connecting to culture and the Land, and embodied healing through drama and LY. For some of the youth leaders, this was their first time leading their peers.

From my ZOLCY experiences, I had learned to become innovative when it came to developing programming, especially on a shoe-string budget. A tarp can act as a shelter in the event that it rains or as an "island" for a collaborative team initiative; a water bottle can be used for hydration or as an item that can be passed around by a large group only using their feet; spaghetti and marshmallows can be a delicious meal or become the tools for an epic game of

“who can build the tallest free-standing structure in 18 minutes”; and a simple game of “rock, paper, scissors” can be modified and transformed into an energizer that has people working on their core strength as they balance their feet in a narrow line in the “splits.” I brought the same type of philosophy and approach to the Tikkun Indigenous youth games and team initiatives because they were both popular and successful, easy to remember, do not require much if any material, create a safe environment for learning and collaboration, and are fun and easy to participate in. These are all important ingredients for self-reliant, self-sufficient, and self-determined community-building and collective organizing.

Back-pocket games/icebreakers. These activities are simple games that do not require complicated rules or equipment. The term “back-pocket” refers to the idea that these games can be “pulled out” on a whim. No complicated planning and no complex materials are needed. The only requirement is participants who are willing to play. The main objectives of these games are to facilitate playful interactions among participants and to create a fun, cohesive, and safe environment while “breaking the ice” or “passing the time.” An example of this is the game of “rock, paper, scissors.” These games are flexible and require a minimum of two participants. They also have no maximum number of participants so that these games can be played by hundreds of people simultaneously.

I introduced many of these back-pocket games during the Tikkun weekly drop-in sessions. The games assisted in supporting the relationship-building process while keeping things “light and fluffy.” The youth would usually watch one of the teacher-candidates and me play a game. Sometimes the youth would not even be paying attention. But, more often than not, someone would look up from his or her phone and, wondering what it was that we were doing, suddenly erupt in laughter. As one person continued to watch and feel more comfortable, some

youth would stand up and participate. These games almost always ended in laughter. Because these games were easy to remember and to teach, it was no surprise when, during the retreat, the Nishnawbe youth leaders began taking the initiative to start a game on their own with their youth peers when, for example, the group was waiting for supper. This is a wonderful example of self-determination.

Team initiatives. These activities are co-operative games that challenge participants through peer-to-peer interaction and movement. Similar to back-pocket games, team initiatives are also not resource-intensive. Team initiatives are more complicated because they are designed to challenge participants to think, communicate, grow trust, problem solve, and learn how to work together to achieve a common goal. An example of a team initiative that was used during the retreat is known as “flip the tarp.” The group of youth were directed to stand on a tarp and were told that the objective was to flip the tarp over (as a group) without anyone stepping off (of the tarp). If someone stepped off, the group would then have to flip the tarp back to the original starting point. The rules of the initiative can vary depending on the cohesiveness of the group. For example, when the group was becoming noticeably frustrated with each other, I adapted the rules and allowed three chances (stepping off of the tarp) before re-flipping the tarp. Likewise, when the initiative became too easy after the third attempt, the rules were adapted to make the task more challenging, such as creating a new rule where none of the group participants could use verbal communication.

The goal of any initiative is to have participants walk away feeling a sense of accomplishment and belonging rather than failure and isolation. A debrief of what went well and what did not go well always follows an initiative. Questions such as “How did the group decide on what to do?”, “What did you learn from this initiative?”, “What is the relevance of this

initiative and how can you apply what you learned in a real life setting?”, “Was there anyone who felt that they were not being heard?”, and “What was frustrating and why?” gave youth the opportunity to share their feelings and be heard.

As stated above, the youth leaders had a chance to participate in and learn about the concept and relevance of team initiatives during the weekly drop-in sessions. The youth leaders, with the support of their teacher-candidate mentor partners, were then given a chance to choose, adapt, and/or create a team initiative that they would facilitate and debrief for their peers during the retreat. The purpose of having them facilitate initiatives was to give them an opportunity to work on their leadership skills through direct experience in a safe space for learning. Although understandably nervous at first, the four youth leaders expressed how excited and empowered they felt during and after their team initiatives. It was amazing to see the growth of these youth leaders and how comfortable they became during the retreat. For example, I remember during the drop-in sessions earlier in the project, one of the youth leaders being particularly shy and withdrawn. This person did not often engage in activities or conversations. However, during the retreat, the same youth leader had created his own team initiative, often engaged in individual and group conversations, and led impromptu back-pocket games with his peers. This is another small but powerful example of the value of Cook’s (2008) philosophy of self-determination and the importance of giving youth a chance to re-claim their autonomy.

Sharing circles. This activity is a culturally relevant tool that resonates with an Indigenous approach to communication; for example, sharing circles have been used by First Nations people as an effective means to address trauma and to promote the healing process (Castellano, 2006). Sharing circles are also a method of creating a safe space for participants to share stories and to express their opinions, views, and experiences (Hart, 2002). Thus we used

sharing circles during the retreat to facilitate self-determination and well-being. Participants were split into four groups and assigned to a cabin. Each cabin had one youth leader, one teacher-candidate mentor, and 3-5 youths. At the end of each retreat day, the four groups would go to their designated cabins where the youth leaders and teacher-candidates would facilitate a sharing circle. The beginning of a cabin sharing circle would begin with two questions: 1) “What was your rose of the day?” and 2) “What was your thorn of the day?” The third question each day varied and would be something a little sillier, like “If you could have any super power what would it be and why?” The purpose of the last question was to help ease any tension or anxiety that might arise if someone had a particularly upsetting “thorn of the day.” The cabin sharing circle acted as a safe space for the members of each cabin group to be heard and let the youth know that their voices mattered. For example, on the second night, several youths began opening up and talking about their experiences of trauma, school-related racism, and the social injustices that they often faced living in Thunder Bay.

The sharing circle was a core Indigenized strategy in our Tikkun Indigenous Youth Land-based well-being retreat to give the Nishnawbe youth leaders greater ownership and leadership over collective sharing and positive story-telling at the end of each day. It was a critical component to allow the northern students to share their own take-away messages and learning together in terms of what made them happy together, what they were still struggling with in terms of “getting an education” in Thunder Bay, and giving them permission to determine their own Indigenous identity in the mainstream/whitestream (Grande, 2003) space of the school’s outdoor education centre. We believe that the sharing circles and the evening fires started a collective process whereby the youth felt safe and encouraged to sing traditional songs in Anishinaabemowin and perform fire ceremony in their own way without fear or concern of being

disciplined or at risk of racist mistreatment. We knew we had achieved a culturally safe space during the retreat that led to collective healing and greater cohesion in relationships.

Chapter 4: Indspire National Gathering Presentation

Proposal for Presentation

Indspire is an Indigenous-led, federally registered Canadian charity “that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada” (Indspire, 2018). The Indspire National Gathering is an annual conference that brings educators and partners together from across Canada to share their educational experiences and strategies (with Indigenous students from kindergarten to grade 12) (Indspire, 2018). I was fortunate enough to present at this conference held in Montreal, from November 29-December 1, 2017. Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational leaders from across Canada presented workshops during the course of two full days to over 700 delegates.

Below is the original workshop proposal that was submitted for peer-review and accepted for the 2017 Indspire’s Indigenous National Gathering. It is important to note that the proposal was written in December and January 2017, before we had had the chance or time to run the 3-day Land-based well-being retreat. At the point of this proposal’s writing, then, we were still in the process of relationship-building with the Indigenous youth of the public high school by spending time in their Indigenous tutor room where students would come to eat lunch, hang out, and seek one-to-one support from the Indigenous Graduation Coach and the FNMI Achievement Tutor. We had only started the planning and logistical coordination for the retreat when this proposal was finalized and submitted. The proposal reflects and summarizes our methodological design and collaborative participatory inquiry with the high school educators and the pre-service teacher candidates.

Indspire Proposal: Lakeheads' Indigenous Tikkun-Mentoring Project: Moving Forward in Pedagogies of Repair and Reconciliation

Abstract. The Lakehead Public School Board (LPSB) and Lakehead University's collaborative Indigenous Tikkun-Mentoring Project is a youth leadership, community engagement and mentoring project designed to support Indigenous students who must leave their northern home communities and families to pursue secondary school in Thunder Bay, a challenging and difficult journey for many Indigenous students. Through our combined efforts of designing, teaching, and researching approaches, Indigenous youth have gained opportunities to meet and gain strength with their Indigenous peers in culturally-based activities, share stories of transition, and develop personal leadership skills while engaging in well-being practices and reparative change for school-based reconciliation.

Description. A local public high school⁵, located in Thunder Bay, northern Ontario, has been developing a mentoring program to support self-identified First Nation students who must leave their northern (remote) communities in order to “get an education” (i.e., a secondary diploma) in the city. This mandatory transition is often challenging as students adjust to urban life and non-Indigenous dominant culture, including their new school environment, all without the close support of extended family and their close-knit First Nation communities.

Lakehead University's Indigenous Tikkun Youth Project (led by Dr. Lisa Korteweg) is based on *Tikkun olam*, a (Hebrew) phrase that means “heal and repair the world” which is the motto of a federally-funded research project out of the University of Windsor (PI: Dr. Yvette Daniel) with five global youth-driven project sites, including Johannesburg, South Africa, Kosovo, and Thunder Bay. All of these youth action sites are focused on how young people in

⁵ The original text has been edited to ensure anonymity of the high school name.

systemically oppressed or marginalized communities can self-determine their needs and actively contribute to social healing, repair, and change/reconciliation through civic and community engagement in their school communities. Dr. Korteweg, along with Faculty of Education teacher candidates and graduate students, have designed weekly Indigenous youth drop-in sessions, a leaders-in-training program for self-selected First Nation students, a Land-based leadership camp weekend, and a global youth leaders forum at the University of Windsor within the international Tikkun Youth Project.

Together, our Lakeheads' Tikkun-Mentorship project works to both repair the culture shock, alienating urban environmental impacts, and well-being challenges for First Nation youth while providing students with opportunities to meet new friends in culturally-based activities, develop storywork and leadership skills, and build personal strength and esteem through well-being practices. Our purpose in all these experiences is to contribute to an increase in Indigenous youth self-confidence and mental health, pride in cultural identity, feelings of connectedness and belonging in an urban school community, and ultimately, graduation and academic success.

Our presentation will consist of video clips, documenting the Land-based outdoor leadership camp, the Leaders-in-Training strengths-based activities, as well as our students' participation in the international youth-leaders forum along with a discussion of our challenges, learning moments, and most impactful experiences. The intended audience is secondary educators, researchers, and Indigenous youth workers and the presentation will address the theme of Emotional Well-Being.

We plan to engage our audience through active participation in some of the most successful Indigenous "voice" or storywork activities as well as providing opportunities for small

and large group discussions on Indigenous youth engagement, for youth and by youth, in mainstream school contexts.

Participants will learn. 1. How to start a mentoring and leadership program for self-identified Indigenous youth; 2. Key moments of learning as program designers of a youth-led initiative; 3. The impacts of our Tikkun-Mentorship program on students in their own voices and stories.

The Indspire Presentation

On December 1, 2017, I co-presented with the Indigenous Graduate Coach from our collaborating high school who attended and participated in the Tikkun Well-being Land-based retreat that was held in March of 2017. Our presentation lasted 1 hour and had 100 registrants, but given it was in the last time-slot for the whole conference, only approximately 30 people actually came, including Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux who sits on the Board of Directors for Teach for Canada, is the Chair on Truth and Reconciliation on behalf of Lakehead University, and is an Honourary Witness for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Also in attendance were several administrators and teachers, including the FNMI specialists from the Lakehead Public School Board.

To prepare for the presentation, I worked with the public high school Indigenous Graduation Coach to bring forward both of our experiences and perspectives. Given that the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project was a collaborative inquiry between Lakehead University and the Lakehead Public School Board, we wanted to provide an overview of the 3-day Tikkun Land-based well-being retreat as both a research project and an innovative program design, and highlight key attributes that would be transferable to other Indspire educators' own high school programs.

During the presentation, I had the whole audience stand up and engage in some of the LY and play-based activities that were done at the retreat with the youth. I thought that this was a great way to re-energize the audience while giving them an experiential taste of LY. One woman, an executive project manager for IBM's corporate citizenship division, was thrilled by our presentation. She told me that she is part of a program funded by IBM who had just built a school for Indigenous youth from the Six Nations of the Grand River, signatories of the Haldimand Treaty of 1784 (Six Nations Council, 2018). The polytechnic school, who is partnered with Mohawk College's Software Engineering program, offers free admission to any student from the Six Nations of Grand River community who is interested in computer technology and software engineering (S. Alves, personal communication, January 18, 2018). The executive project manager was interested in hiring me to facilitate a retreat similar to what we had presented at this conference for the staff and students of that school. She even asked to film me doing a LY exercise so she could show it to her employees! A follow-up email from her said that she shared the LY video with a friend who was going through a difficult time and said that it helped keep her friends' spirits high. Additionally, she stated, "I know it helped one person tremendously and it will inspire more people" (S. Alves, personal communication, December 4, 2017). This conversation re-affirmed my theory that laughter, especially generated through LY, has beneficial psychological and physiological effects through somatic or embodied practices applicable to all educators and contexts, but may be especially important for participants who have been marginalized or face particular risks and unsafe conditions for learning.

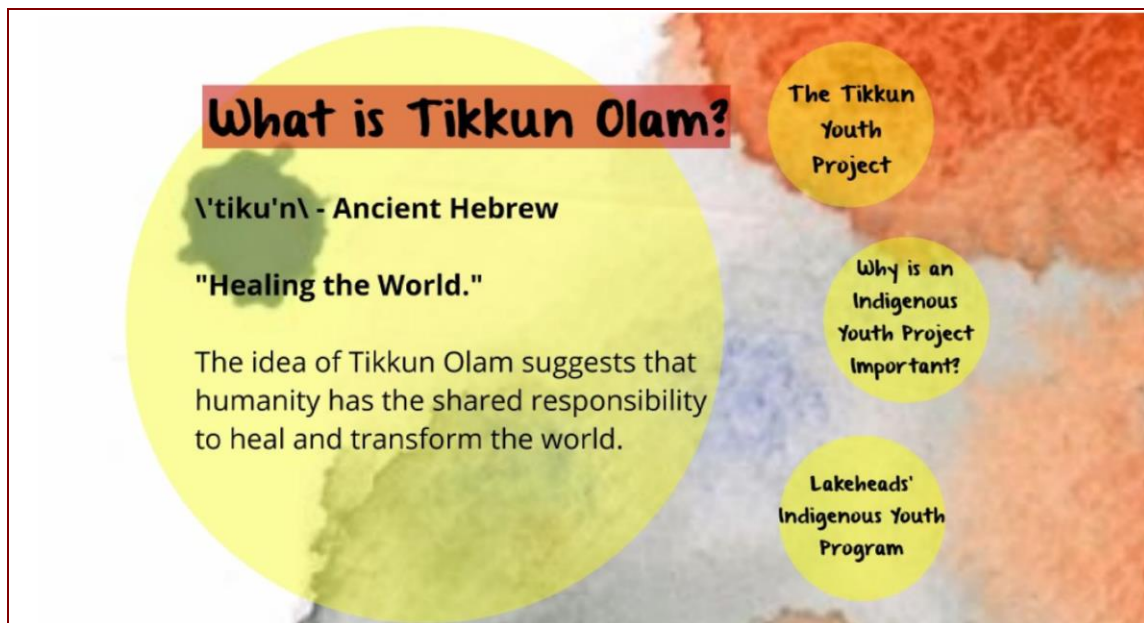
The Prezi Presentation

The Prezi presentation slides that were the content of the Indspire conference presentation are documented on the following pages (pp. 39-44). These slides have been modified to fit the


page views and, therefore, do not always include every section or slide that was used in the presentation.



Slide 1: For the start of the presentation, we wanted to emphasize the collaborative nature of the project, funders, and key words.



Slide 5: It was important to explain why the term “Tikkun” was used for this international project and how it was relevant to working with Nishnawbe youth.

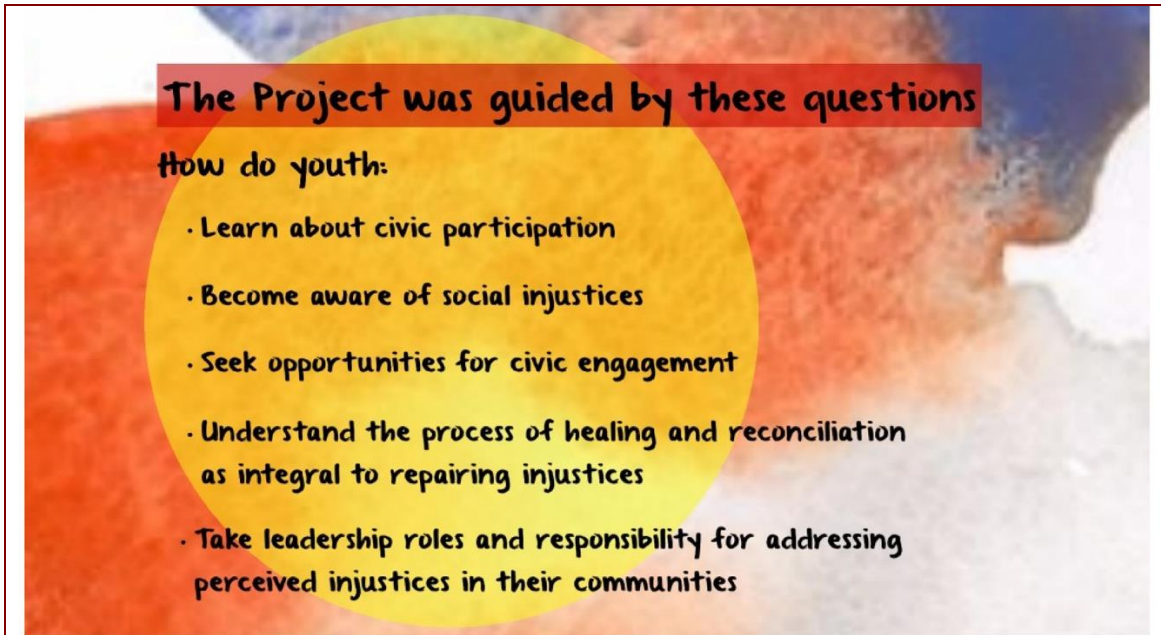


The Tikkun Youth Project

- The Tikkun Youth Project was the vision of Dr. Yvette Daniels, an Israeli-born Canadian
- 3-year international action-oriented research study that aimed to explore, facilitate, and promote youth-led civic engagement
- Conducted in five sites in three countries (Canada, Kosovo, S. Africa)
- Project guided by notion of "Tikkun" through acts promoting social justice

Guiding Questions

Slide 6: A brief overview of the key components of this international youth project, including its origins and the connection to the other four research sites.



The Project was guided by these questions

How do youth:

- Learn about civic participation
- Become aware of social injustices
- Seek opportunities for civic engagement
- Understand the process of healing and reconciliation as integral to repairing injustices
- Take leadership roles and responsibility for addressing perceived injustices in their communities

Slide 7: These guiding questions showed the relevance of this project and the importance of youth civic engagement.

Going to Thunder Bay for an Education

When a FN youth comes to Thunder Bay to get an education, they often face:

- Homesickness
- Racism and aggression
- Lack of adult advocacy to support needs
- Self harm and other mental health problem
- Self-medication/substance abuse
- Peer bullying and lateral violence
- Hate crime capital of Canada (StatsCan 2013)
- Mistrust of justice system and policing - The largest provincial Coroner's inquest

- Academically unprepared
- Alienation

Lakehead
Public
Schools

Slide 8: The social and emotional injustices that Nishnawbe youth face in Thunder Bay explained the important need for a project like the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project.

Lakehead's Indigenous Youth Program

- LakeheadU collaboration with high school's Four-Directions Program
- Vision was to synthesize prior "mentorship" program with empowered youth leadership, by youth for youth

Oct.
2016

4 LU mentors
chosen based
on experience

Weekly
visits begin
at local HS

Building
relationships
through
play

4 FN youth
leaders
chosen

Mentors/
leaders paired
together

3-day Youth
Retreat

Leadership
through play-
based training

March
2017

But
how??

Slide 10: A timeline of the third year of the Indigenous Tikkun Project and the key elements that made the project successful.

Tikkun Indigenous Youth Retreat

Purpose

- Build relationships (Indigenous peers, non-Indigenous teachers/allies/researchers)
- Opportunity for youth leaders to develop voice for self-advocacy
- Empowering FN youth to become leaders, agents of change
- Provide a safe-space for "healing"
- To build confidence, pride, community, and relationships

How?

Slide 12: An emphasis on these five points showed why a youth retreat could be valuable for schools to implement in order to better support Nishnawbe youth.

How?

- Through laughter play-based group games and initiatives
- Outdoor/land-based activities



- 3 days and 2 nights at Outdoor Centre
- 4 cabins - Mentors/youth-leaders/youth
- Youth-led games/activities
- Community mealtime
- Cabin (evening) sharing circles
- No internet!

Slide 13: A brief overview of the key elements of the retreat were expanded on and a 7-minute video of the retreat that I produced was shown on the next slide.

Indigenous Youth Speak Up

Challenges and Obstacles that Indigenous Youth Face in Thunder Bay and Mainstream Schools:

- "I always feel homesick... I really miss my family back home especially my little sister."
- "I remember moving here...I was in third grade...I went to a [mainstream] elementary school and I remember feeling that I was stupid. They were doing fractions and they were so good at it and I was like what the hell's a fraction? I never learned all of this stuff..."
- "I moved to Thunder Bay when I was seven and then in grade 10, my parents moved back home so then I became a boarding student and it was really weird...I live with 11 people and it's super crowded... that's the downside about being a boarding student... you don't get to pick where you live or who you live with..."

Slide 15: These were some of the things that youth said and discussed during the evening cabin sharing circles.

And the Need for Safe Indigenous ("Nish") Community Space in Mainstream Schools

- "One thing my cousin told me was the only reason why he chooses to go the "Nish" room after lunch [instead of regular class] is because he feels more safe...he doesn't feel judged...he feels like he really belongs there..."
- "Community means a place where you're comfortable and safe. A place to not be afraid of being yourself. The "Nish" room is that place for us at our school...because there are people like you that come into the room who understand where you come from. We are accepting in that room. Not like other places in the school...like the cafeteria. All those other people grew up in Thunder Bay. They know each other. Most of us don't know a single person when we arrive. Our voices are heard in that room."

Slide 16: During the evening sharing circles, youth emphasized the importance of a safe space for them in their school. This was a key take-away point for educators in the audience.

Indigenous Youth Reactions & Responses to the Tikkun Outdoor Ed Retreat:

Embodied Healing & Building Community - for & by Indigenous youth:

- "One thing I would take away [from this retreat] was the laughing...my lungs were in pain...this guy went to the spirit realm...he just passed out - he found his inner peace [referring to another youth]."
- "The laughing...there was a lot of laughing today and it was awesome and I definitely met my goal for the weekend just to be a little more social. I was really social today. I don't even think I am that social on a day to day basis..."
- "Laughter. Laughing was amazing...I had a really good release from that cause laughter is just something...before...I don't really know what happened...when I moved here I just got really depressed..."

Slide 17: Youth also emphasized the LY session that took place during the second day. This is where I expanded on LY and gave the audience an opportunity to partake in a short LY session.

Chapter 5: Poster Portfolio Presentation

In the spring of 2017, I received the 3M National Student Fellowship – an award that honours ten students in Canada who demonstrate outstanding leadership at the post-secondary education level. The ten recipients, or 3M Fellows, were invited to the annual conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) in June of 2017, where we participated in the 3M National Student Fellowship Program retreat. During this retreat, we planned and hosted the closing plenary. The overarching theme of the plenary was mental health and well-being. Each of the Fellows presented a section of the plenary that was based on their area of research and leadership work. During my 1-hour presentation, I discussed my struggles with mental health and shared the work that I did with the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project and introduced the concept of LY as embodied well-being. I was able to get the entire group who were in attendance to engage in LY exercises throughout the plenary. It was remarkable to see professors, educators, and people of all ages laughing with each other and re-connecting with their childlike playfulness!

I then applied to present my portfolio work at the STLHE's annual conference in 2018. The conference was held at the University of Sherbrooke from June 19-22, 2018. The proposal that was accepted by STLHE follows.

Submission Proposal for STLHE Conference Sherbrooke, Quebec⁶

Proposal Title: What is Laughter Yoga and How is it Being Used to Promote Well-being?

Author: Jacky W. L. Chan

Type of Paper: Master in Education portfolio: Reflection on experience

Session Format: Poster session

⁶ I have departed from standard APA formatting in order to keep with the original format of the portfolio submission.

Conference Thread: Teaching practices to support experiential learning

Conference Stream: 3M Fellow

Session Description: Laughter is a universally shared feature of nonverbal communication that is unique to all human groups throughout the world, particularly within the context of social interactions, including play, and has been used as a form of physiological and psychological therapy for the past millennia (Bennett et al., 2014; Berk, Felton, Tan, Bittman, & Westengard, 2001). Additionally, laughter has been used as a form of communal storytelling in many traditional societies (Ballick & Lee, 2003), including the Alaska Native Peoples, whose cultural values acknowledge laughter as “good medicine” and healing towards a state of positive well-being (Cueva, Kuhnley, Lanier, & Dignan, 2006). Laughter can promote “beneficial physiological changes and an overall sense of well-being” (Rosner, 2002, p. 435) and has been recognized and reported in the fields of geriatrics, oncology, critical care, psychiatry, rehabilitation, rheumatology, and hospice care (Berk et al, 2001; Rosner, 2002). Health care practitioners have begun to recognize the importance of humor and laughter in the reduction of stress and as a promoter of well-being to both patients and caregivers (Rosner, 2002). It has been well documented and established that laughter reduces depression, anxiety, stress, and fatigue, while also improving immunity, quality of life, happiness, self-esteem, and resilience (Bennett, 2014; Kim et al., 2015).

My Master in Education portfolio focuses on how Laughter Yoga can promote positive well-being in Nishnawbe youth. Laughter Yoga is a unique blend of mindfulness techniques, meditation, yogic-breathing, and play-based activities. I will present how a school-based Laughter Yoga program could benefit an overall school environment where emotional and physical well-being are nurtured through embodied learning and physical activity.

Element of Engagement: This poster session will give attendees a better understanding of the value and benefits of laughter and play-based learning. I will showcase how I have used Laughter-Play Yoga to engage Nishnawbe youth and the profound impacts that occurred from doing so. This project was part of a SSHRC-funded international research project entitled “The Tikkun Project: Pedagogies of Repair and Reconciliation.” Attendees will engage in discussion and learn how they can use this approach in their own institutions as pedagogy to support experiential learning and well-being strategies.

Abstract: Governments, school boards, and school communities are being challenged by the increase in mental health concerns among First Nations youth and are struggling to understand how to provide effective supports to improve the environmental and educational factors that are impacting their well-being (Dell & Lyons, 2007; Elias, et al., 2012; Kumar, 2016; The Assembly of First Nations, 2015). My research examines how Laughter Yoga (a unique blend of mindfulness techniques, meditation, yogic-breathing, and play-based activities) can be integrated in curriculum and pedagogy to promote well-being, relationship building, resilience, and classroom management. Although qualitative studies of laughter have shown positive results in the field of healthcare, there is little research in the field of education on this topic, including specifically on how laughter and play can be used as a tool to promote overall well-being in a First Nations school community.

The Poster: The poster on page 49 is a summary of the literature (that was described in Chapter 2). The main components of the poster are the abstract, the research questions that guided the portfolio, the problem statement, the purpose of the portfolio, the background, the significance of the portfolio, the conclusion, and some of the references that were included in the literature

review. The word art is composed of some of the things that the youth said about the LY session.

Five photos are included in the poster that were photographed during the retreat's LY session.

Laughter Yoga as Embodied Healing for Educational Well-being with First Nation Youth

Jacky WL Chan M.Ed, 2nd year - jchan@lakeheadu.ca



Faculty of Education

Abstract

Governments and school communities are being challenged by the increase of mental health concerns among First Nation youth and are struggling to understand how to provide effective supports to improve the environments. Educational research that is impacting their well-being (Dut & Lyons, 2017; Ellis, et al., 2012; Kumar, 2016).

This research looks at how Laughter Yoga (a unique blend of mindfulness techniques, meditation, yoga-breathing, and play-based activities) can be used to help First Nation youth with the promotion of well-being, relationship building, resilience, and classroom management.

Research Questions

- How can Laughter Yoga promote healing and well-being for northern First Nation youth in Thunder Bay schools?
- How can mental health, well-being, and healing from an Indigenous perspective be included in schools to help northern First Nation youth with the ongoing neo-colonial conditions and systemic racism in Thunder Bay?

Problem Statement

Qualitative studies of laughter have shown positive results within the field of healthcare (Berk et al., 2001; Rosner, 2002) and, in tandem, there is an increasing number of studies on the health benefits of laughter in Indigenous people (Blackstock, 2008; Langille & Poole, 2010). There remains, however, a gap in the literature on how different mindfulness methods, such as Laughter Yoga, could be used as a well-being strategy for First Nation youth within community-based schools. Various ongoing initiatives exist in Canadian schools that are directed specifically towards First Nation youth and it is not clear how focused teachers and high school programs are on Indigenous youth well-being.

Purpose of Portfolio

To provide insight into the value of LY as an effective strategy for fostering well-being with First Nation youth and how it can be integrated into a school-based program.

This portfolio will include three tasks: (1) a review of relevant literature; (2) a First presentation that showcases a 3-day well-being retreat focused on laughter and play; and (3) three multimedia representations showcasing the value and effectiveness of Laughter Yoga.

The intended audience for this portfolio is other educators, support staff, social workers or counsellors, and educational organizations that work with First Nation youth.

Background

First Nation youth have a higher documented rate of substance abuse, sexual abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation than non-Indigenous youth (Kumar, 2016; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016).

Suicide rates are five times higher for First Nation youth between the ages of 10-29 – the highest rate of suicide of any group in Canada (Kumar, 2016).

These consequences are connected to Canada's history and policies of colonialism, including the struggles of intergenerational trauma due to the legacy of residential schools. (Canadian Human Rights Commission Information Governance Centre, 2014; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016).

Canada's policies of colonialism continue as First Nation youth are forced to leave their reserve communities, usually after Grade 6, to attend previously funded schools (Richard, 2014).

Approximately 40 percent of First Nation youth leave their communities to attend high school (Richard, 2014).

Many youth from northern Ontario communities move to the city of Thunder Bay to "get an education" and often face homelessness, loss of familial supports, and risk of abuse by racist residents (Talaga, 2017).

The dislocation from family and community continues to subject youths to more psychological exclusion, racist abuse, and physical threats than non-Indigenous youth (Talaga, 2017; Richards, 2014).

The severity of risk to First Nation youth's mental health and safety can be attributed to the challenges they have to face in order to access and pursue a regular high school education (CEEC, 2011; Richard, 2014).

Significance of Portfolio

An Indigenous approach to educational programming should include "intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of development, for which growth can be demonstrated in a number of personalized, non-competitive, and inclusive ways" (Piigonen et al., 2013, p. 31).

Neeganagwedjin (2013) emphasizes the importance of this four-dimensional approach to traditional First Nation teaching and learning where the balance of "emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs" (p. 19) is always at the forefront.

An Indigenous approach to educational programming should be considered when developing and implementing well-being strategies/programs within the school environment.

A Laughter Yoga program could be a useful well-being strategy since those who participate in laughter yoga sessions have been shown to benefit (Morá-Ripoll, 2011, p. 60), resonating with the four dimensions of First Nation teaching and learning.

Significance of Portfolio (cont'd)

- Hart (2010) describes the experience of communal music-making, dancing, and laughter as "inward exploration" (p. 8) or the spirituality of "wholeness" (p. 8) that honours ceremony and experience, which is fundamental to Indigenous methodologies (see also Omitson, 2016).
- Laughter therapy reduces depression, anxiety, and stress, while improving immunity, quality of life, happiness, self-esteem, resilience, and an overall sense of well-being (Bennett, et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2010; Rosner, 2002).
- A successful program that promotes well-being for First Nation youth must "focus on restoring a balanced well-being within the individual and within the context of relationships to others" (Blackstock, 2004, p. 4-9).
- A foundation towards positive health and well-being is dependent on the capacity towards building relationships among "Nations, Family, Community, and Land" (First Nation Health Authority, 2015, p. 15).
- The therapeutic value of laughter "builds group identity, solidarity, and cohesiveness" (Morá-Ripoll, 2010, p. 58).

Conclusion

It is not clear whether the concept of Laughter Yoga would be received positively by school leaders, teachers, administrators, or families as a valid form of fostering well-being and healing with First Nation youth. A more rigorous study, over a longer period of time and with different youth from different Nations, is recommended.

good lungs
wanted
laughing
amazing
resistant
just
expressive
stop
pain
laughing
weekend
trying
inner
circle
really
ever
laugh
spirit

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Special thanks to Dr. Lisa Korneweg (Supervisor), SSHRC, and the First Nation Health Authority, Thunder Bay District School Board, and all of the youth that made this possible.



A Reflection on the Poster Presentation Experience

Approximately 25 individuals were presenting their research during the poster session. Each poster stood on a stand for easy viewing. The poster session lasted two hours during which conference attendees were offered hors d'oeuvres and could stop by and view posters of interest and talk with the presenters if desired. At first, I felt a bit out of place and unsure of what to do. I felt like a salesperson trying to get someone to buy a product that I was selling, which was slightly uncomfortable. About a dozen people approached me throughout the session and asked about my portfolio work. Many of these people commended the work that I was doing and were fascinated by the concept of LY as embodied well-being for Nishnawbe youth. I had comments like, "The work you are doing is really important," "It's great that you are re-introducing the value of laughter and play to promote well-being," and "Have you considered doing a PhD?" It was a great experience to meet academics in the field of education and to talk to likeminded people.

I had the distinct pleasure of reconnecting with one professor, Dr. Billy Streat who teaches at the University of Alberta. He is also a LY instructor who trained with Dr. Madan Kataria! This professor, who is a 3M National Teaching Fellow and a Master Somatic Coach, teaches in the Department of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation and specializes in play-based learning and the theory and practice of yoga. I was impressed that there was another 3M fellow and participant who was working in the same area of research as me: somatic and ontological approaches to leadership and well-being; mindfulness in educational contexts; and the role of laughter in learning and well-being. Billy introduced me to many of his colleagues, and we shared quite a few laughs throughout the week. We even did some LY together in a workshop that he was presenting and that I was attending. What fun!

I had first met Billy at the 2017 STLHE conference in Halifax. We were introduced by a 3M National Teaching Fellow who thought that we would have a lot in common. It turns out that we did. Billy was fascinated by the work that I was doing with the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project and how I was introducing the concept of LY as embodied well-being with Nishnawbe youth. He, like so many other Canadians, was unaware of the atrocities and social injustices that many First Nations people have experienced, and continue to experience. After a long discussion about our research projects and personal and academic interests during the 3M reunion dinner party, we facilitated an impromptu LY session during the bus ride back to our hotel with all of the 3M National Teaching Fellows and Student Fellows!

During the 2018 STLHE conference, we discussed the possibility of me doing a PhD under his guidance. We discussed the concept of traditional martial arts as a means of somatic/embodied healing for Indigenous youth and the possibilities of exploring traditional Indigenous Chinese knowledge as a means towards re-connecting Indigenous youth to their culture and heritage. For example, Daoism is a traditional Chinese religion and way of knowing that is embedded within traditional Chinese martial arts. The yin yang symbol that is found in Daoism and represents duality, a central principal of Daoism, is also found in many traditional Chinese martial arts. Yin yang represents the interconnectedness and interdependence that is found in the natural world. And so, the similarities between the yin yang symbol and the medicine wheel as Indigenous knowledge could be a unique approach or a basis of exploration for developing a culturally relevant and holistic martial arts style to facilitate Indigenous youth well-being. The idea is in its infancy stage and would require much more thought and deliberation if I were to pursue this as a PhD. I discussed it with Billy and with other academics

during the 2018 conference and have received positive responses and encouragement to pursue this idea.

Chapter 6: Final Reflections

A Reflection on LY in the Tikkun Land-based Well-being Retreat

The retreat was designed in response to the youth requesting and needing to have a place outside the school where they could come together as a collective of peers to hang out and find commonalities to build community, trust, relationships, and to relate to each other's experiences of navigating the colonial oppressions they experience in the city and school. Although the concept of hosting a retreat for these youth was good in theory, we found that many of the youth were reluctant to attend. Indeed, many of the youth decided to attend only days before the retreat began. There were many reasons for this reluctance: some youth preferred to be with their friends on the weekends, some had to work, some were not interested, and many, including one of the youth leaders, were suffering from anxiety and other mental health issues that were aggravated by the riskiness of the unknown since most of these youth had never been to the board's Outdoor Education Centre, participated in summer camps, or had been part of any leadership retreats in their educational lives.

We were asking the youth to take a leap of faith and trust a group of mostly non-Indigenous educators that we would give them a good and fun experience. Their own school lives had conditioned them to not trust or believe that the education system would offer them any value-added, enriched, or positive experiences. It took a lot of encouragement and reassurances from the FNMI Achievement Tutor and the Indigenous Graduation Coach that the experience would be worthwhile and it was only due to the already strong relationships of trust with the Graduation Coach and the Achievement Tutor that the 18 northern Nishnawbe students agreed to go. We heard comments such as: "I felt like this (retreat) was pointless at first"; "When we first arrived no one was talking to each other"; and "(Some of the youth) wanted to back out at the

last minute.” Thankfully their perceptions shifted and we then heard comments like: “I kinda don’t want to leave tomorrow, it’s so sad;” “I hope these friendships last;” and “I’m really happy I did (come to the retreat).”

There were many real cultural, psychological, and social barriers as well as educational obstacles that made forging relationships of trust between the Nishnawbe youth and the attending educators difficult to achieve in a public high school context. However, during the Land-based well-being retreat, many important factors contributed to overcoming these barriers. I believe that LY was particularly important because it appeared that many of the students’ psychological walls and anxieties seemed to break down or melt away through a LY session that took place on the second day of the retreat. This session had a strong positive impact on each individual and the dynamics of the whole group. Everyone who was present during this LY session seemed to feel the incredible energy that occurred. The school staff and teacher-candidates seemed genuinely surprised at how the LY session impacted the youth. Many of the youth admitted that they had not laughed like that in years while some of the school staff said that they had never seen most of these youth laugh at all.

The late morning LY session created an atmosphere of safety, belonging, and trust in the group that continued through the rest of the retreat. This energy and transformation can be seen in the short 7-minute video that I produced based on video footage that was captured during the well-being retreat. This transformation can only be understood when one watches this video (which was showcased during the Indspire National Gathering and is part of the Prezi presentation). It was amazing for me to witness how the embodied practice of LY dramatically shifted the socio-emotional conditions of the retreat towards positive embodied healing. In all my LY facilitations, I had never witnessed something so transformational in such a short amount of

time. In fact, it was this LY session that made me reconsider the direction of my Master's portfolio work. Initially, my work was going to focus on "Traditional martial arts practice as a well-being strategy for youth" but I was so moved and convinced by the LY experience that, within weeks, I decided to focus on "LY as a well-being strategy for First Nations Youth" which eventually turned into "LY as embodied healing for educational well-being with Nishnawbe youth".

Conclusion

My portfolio work consists of six chapters. The first, presented in Chapter 1, summarizes the work that I did with the SSHRC-funded project entitled *Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project: Pedagogies of Repair and Reconciliation*. I outline my role during the third year of the project as well as my role in the development of the 3-day Land-based well-being retreat that was hosted for, by, and with Nishnawbe youth.

The second, presented in Chapter 2, is a literature review that describes how First Nations youth are at higher risks of mental health issues that are linked to the impacts of colonialism and their access to "getting an education." These issues are expanded on as I describe the educational inequities, social injustices, and racism that Nishnawbe youth experience in the city of Thunder Bay. I then introduce the concept of LY and how LY can be used as an approach to embodied healing and well-being for Nishnawbe youth within the school context.

The third, presented in Chapter 3, outlines the key components of the Land-based well-being retreat, including the mentorship process and the activities, including icebreakers, team initiatives, and sharing circles that made this retreat so successful.

The fourth, presented in Chapter 4, focuses on a presentation that I gave at the 2017 Indspire National Gathering for Indigenous education. I include the key Prezi presentation slides

that I used during the presentation that focuses on the Land-based well-being retreat and include a reflection on my experiences during the National gathering.

The fifth, presented in Chapter 5, focuses on a poster presentation that I gave at the annual conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education that took place in June of 2018. The actual poster is included as well as a reflection on my experience at the conference.

I believe that this portfolio work has contributed to the four objectives (outlined on page 1) of the international youth project, the *Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project: Pedagogies of Repair and Reconciliation*. 1) We identified the relevance and importance of providing a safe-space where Nishnawbe youth could re-establish harmony between the four domains (mental, physical, emotional and spiritual), their relationships to others, and their relationship to the Land (Blackstock, 2008) as a positive approach to engage Nishnawbe youth in discussions of civic engagement. 2) The embodied experience of civic engagement was explored and translated by giving the youth the opportunity to re-claim their autonomy and self-determination (Cook, 2018) through the First Nations youth leaders' active participation in the mentorship (LIT) program and their abilities (gained from the LIT program) to then facilitate team-initiatives, activities, and cabin sharing-circles during the retreat. 3) We generated data from the voice-recorded cabin sharing circles that gave us a better understanding of the lived experiences of Nishnawbe youth and the social injustices that they regularly face in the city of Thunder Bay. Suggestions from the youth, such as the creation of more safe-spaces in schools and the implementation of culturally responsive programs and resurgent practices, such as a Nishnawbe student council, student-led school powwows, and school-based Indigenous languages classes, are ways in which public school spaces can begin to repair the injustices that these youth face. 4) We were able to take

these findings from the 2017/2018 Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project and the Land-based well-being retreat and showcase the Nishnawbe youth experiences and voices at the 2017 Indspire National Gathering and the 2018 Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education conference.

In addition to meeting the four objectives of the international youth project, I am confident that we also went beyond the intended purposes of the well-being retreat. These retreat goals included building positive healing relationships amongst all participants involved, providing a safe-space for the youth leaders to develop a voice for self-advocacy, empowering youth to become leaders and agents of change, providing a safe-space for healing, and an environment where youth were able to build their confidence, pride, community, and relationships amongst themselves.

This portfolio work has truly been an experiential journey of learning and I am incredibly grateful to all of those who were part of the Tikkun Indigenous Youth Project. In closing, I strongly encourage anyone who works with Nishnawbe youth to consider the concept of a Land-based well-being retreat as a culturally responsive method that promotes the four domains (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) of well-being or *mino-biimaadziwin*. And finally, I encourage everyone to try, at least once, LY as a method of promoting and supporting an overall sense of well-being. Laughter really is the best medicine.

Chi' miigwech. Do dze. Namaste. Domo arigatou gozaimasu.

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