Kiskenimisowin (self-knowledge): Co-researching Wellbeing With Canadian First Nations Youth Through Participatory Visual Methods

Abstract

Indigenous youth represent one of the most marginalized demographics in Canada. As such they must contend with many barriers to wellness that stem from oppression, including historical and ongoing colonization and racism. Developing effective health programming requires innovation and flexibility, especially important when programs take place in diverse Indigenous communities where local needs and cultural practices vary. This article reports the findings of an after-school program in 2014 that blended a participatory visual method of research with Indigenous knowledge, methodologies, and practices to provide sociocultural health programming for youth in a First Nation in southern Saskatchewan, Canada. Engaging with youth to co-research wellbeing through the arts was conceptualized as both research and health promotion. Participatory arts methods created a safe space for youth to express their views of health and wellness issues while developing self-knowledge about their individual and cultural identities.

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[1] Our research team was saddened by the passing of our colleague Dr. Episkenew in February 2016. She was integral to our research and contributed to this article before she began her spirit journey.

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Introduction

Kiskenimisowin *is the Cree word for "knowing oneself." In the Cree language, the medial stem "iso" indicates a focus on self or self group[2] and the activity within. One comes to know oneself through interaction with the self (introspection, self-reflection) and the world around oneself. Creative forms of communication using tools (art materials and techniques) and others to assist that creation leads to exposure and expression of the self in all dimensions (physical, spiritual, mental, socio-emotional).* (K. Goulet,[3] personal communication, September 7, 2014)

Health research is undergoing a shift such that how we view health and engage in health research is becoming more open to alternative definitions, perspectives, and practices. The biomedical model of health that considers illness with minimal account of psychological and social factors is shifting in the face of a growing recognition that health has sociocultural determinants (Raphael, 2006). New research methodologies are now being recognized for their potential contributions to health knowledge. Participatory visual methods are participant-centred, image-based techniques that "facilitate participants in finding their own language to articulate what they know and help them put words to their ideas and share understandings of their worlds, thereby giving participants more control over the research process" (Enright, 2013, p. 216). These methods can shift the conventions of research authority by empowering participants to express their own interpretations of their lived experiences.

Arts-based research and programming can be used to promote health and wellness. They have potential for meaningful engagement with youth. Cultural arts programs with non-Indigenous youth labelled "at risk" and experiencing mental health challenges have

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[2] "Self-group" is a Cree concept of the plural form of self. It refers to any form of identifiable collective unit or self identified group, for example a small group, an extended family or a nation.
[3] Keith Goulet, a fluent Cree speaker, is an adjunct professor in Indigenous Studies at First Nations University of Canada and a former educator and provincial cabinet minister. He grew up in a traditional lifestyle of hunting, fishing, gathering, and trapping in the Nehinuw (Cree) community of Cumberland House, Saskatchewan.

demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of anger management, life skills, and pro-social attitudes and behaviours (Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, & Rowe, 2009). Indigenous youth also respond well to arts programming (Flicker et al., 2014; Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, & Schmidt, 2011; Yuen et al., 2013) when participatory visual methods are done from a decolonizing perspective that eschews colonial tendencies to focus on deficits, labels, and measurements (Linklater, 2014). Arts-based programming as research has dual purposes that inform each other. One purpose is to explore the lives and experiences of participants while the other acknowledges that this form of exploration is an inter-subjective and potentially transformative process that can enhance wellbeing (McNamee, 1988).

Health promotion in Indigenous communities must be considered wholistically within the context of colonization, which has oppressed and damaged Indigenous Peoples' economic and social systems. Colonialism continues to be enacted in relationships of power and privilege that have been constructed historically through many means, including war, law, policy, theoretical constructs, and the media (Anderson & Robertson, 2011; Episkenew, 2009; Goulet & Goulet, 2014). The trauma caused by colonization as well as ongoing racism and micro-aggressions continue to affect the health of Indigenous people (Chae & Walters, 2009; Currie, Wild, Schopflocher, & Laing, 2015). Despite these stressors, Indigenous people have protective buffers such as language and culture to aid in their resistance to ongoing racism and colonialism (Chandler & Lalonde, 2009). The reinforcement of strong individual and cultural identities, combined with systemic change such as the decolonization of institutions, social structures, and mentalities, is important in addressing health issues in Indigenous communities (Czyzewski, 2011; Kirmayer, Tait, & Simpson, 2009).

Indigenous knowledge identifies a local system of being, knowing, and expressing inculcated into all aspects of a society's knowledges, language, and practices (Settee, 2013). In the Cree language, *pimatisiwin* translates as "life," while *pimachihowin* is "lifehood action." David Benjoe, a visual artist and educator and co-author of this paper, explains how self-knowledge is embedded in concepts of a healthy life:

> *You can go through all the descriptions of what makes a human being whole, but in our languages we usually just said life. It was just* pimatisiwin ... *When it comes to health, you have to have an understanding of who you are and where you fit in terms of your understanding of the world. So it becomes well rounded. It becomes, as people say, wholistic. ... Health is ... not just about [being] physically healthy, there's also mentally healthy too. And emotionally healthy.*

Pimachihisowin is the self-determined action of individuals, groups, and nations in the quest for life, livelihood, and survival; it too refers to "life" but with the middle stem—*ihiso*—signifying the self-determined intentionality of an individual or self-group (Goulet & Goulet, 2014). Individuals and collectives are understood to have the authority to interpret what constitutes good living and how such states can be sought and maintained (Heritz, 2012). Indigenous

knowledge recognizes that artistic endeavours are part of life, promoting and sustaining health and wellness.

Historically, the creative arts were particularly important to Indigenous people. The ancient rock art, or *asinapiskuhigehin*, of the Cree people used power-based symbols to represent life forces of the universe. Cultural symbols continue to be of central importance to the cultural identity of the Cree (K. Goulet, personal communication, September 7, 2014), whether as a form of cultural expression and/or as part of healing activities (Archibald & Dewar, 2010). Armstrong (2002) wrote, "Aboriginal arts are a necessary facet of individual and community health, containing symbolic significance and relevance integral to the deconstruction of the effects of being colonized … [r]einforcing the reconstruction of what is precious" (para. 19).

Artistic expression is one means through which humans acquire a sense of wholeness. Traditional song and other embodied forms of expression such as dance and drawing can reconnect Indigenous people with their inner spirits, the earth, and other relations, contributing to a sense of renewal and strength (Goudreau, Weber-Pillwax, Cote-Meek, Madill, & Wilson, 2008; Nadeau & Young, 2006). The arts are how we learn about, come to terms with, and express our identities, emotions, thoughts, and spiritualities. Cultural arts transmit traditional knowledge but they also promote embodied healing as individuals become absorbed in tasks, perform rhythmic physical movements, and participate in the reinforcement of social bonds (Lincoln, 2010).

This article details the outcomes of an after-school visual arts program that was developed as a culturally appropriate means to promote wellbeing among First Nations youth. It is part of a larger project in wellness promotion where engagement in the creative arts is used to facilitate self-expression, leadership skills, and healthy decision-making. The focus of this paper is to demonstrate the efficacy of arts-based activities both for wellness promotion and as a research method. This project uses a form of research that draws upon the local Indigenous knowledge of the participants to decolonize racialized societal representations while developing youth-inspired notions of wellbeing.

Project and Methods

We are a collaborative research partnership of Indigenous and settler scholars and health professionals who have been working in partnership since 2005 with File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) Health Services. FHQTC serves 11 First Nations from five cultural and linguistic groups situated in southern Saskatchewan, Canada. One goal of our overarching project, called "Acting Out! But in a Good Way," is to explore how arts-based work grounded in Indigenous values and practices improves First Nations youths' sense of wellness and wellbeing, and how arts-based Indigenous methods have an impact on youths' health choices and actions. Based on an Indigenous view of wholistic health, we blend Indigenous knowledge and relational practices with participatory visual methods in urban and First Nation locations. Visual arts, participatory video production, and applied theatre are used to develop positive relationships and

enhance feelings of wellbeing in the physical, intellectual, social/emotional, and spiritual domains.

Our work is informed by multiple influences that we apply in the contexts of arts, education, and health. Theories of colonization-decolonization point to decolonization as involving the critical identification and dismantling of structures, ideologies, and mentalities that devalue, minimize, or subjugate Indigenous ways of knowing and living, combined with the restoration of Indigenous cultural knowledge and practice (Episkenew, 2009; Graveline, 1998; Linklater, 2014; Smith, 1999). Decolonizing theory challenges terms like "at risk" and "intervention" for they imply individual deficits or pathologies to be fixed, rather than understanding the oppressive colonial structure as the source of health disparities (Czyzewski, 2011). Indigenous research methodologies centralize relationships and self-knowledge (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Furthermore, the arts enable an embodied process of interaction in which alternative futures can be modelled and transformed through an aesthetic and playful process within a creative space (Boal, 1979; Fay, 1987; Meyer, 2008). Our use of participatory visual methods offers youth a wholistic medium through which they can develop self-knowledge, thus becoming researchers into their lives.

Indigenous methodologies value self-knowledge and subjective experience (Absolon, 2011). They are effective for wellness promotion because the emphasis placed upon self-determination decolonizes identities and relationships (Heritz, 2012; Smith, 1999). Legitimating individual subjectivity and experience reasserts the value and authority of traditional Indigenous ways of being. Research methodologies directly impact the development of the researcher–participant relationship, so the strong valuation of relationality inherent to Indigenous axiology means that research must make relational accountability a priority (Wilson, 2008).

Multiday drama workshops that were implemented in different communities during earlier stages of the larger project developed positive relationships and health leadership skills with Indigenous youth (Goulet et al., 2011; Yuen et al., 2013). However, there was a need to assess the impact of arts programming on youth wellbeing across a longer period of time than 3-day workshops. Our community partners and our Elders' Advisory Circle asked the research team to offer after-school arts programming for junior high and high school students. Our research partner then communicated the possibility of arts-based research programs to the different schools in the Tribal Council area. This article is based on one such 4-month program that took place as an after-school arts class in an Anishnabe and Nahiyawak (Cree) community from November 2013 to June of 2014.

Youth were invited to attend the after-school arts class with the understanding that it was connected to a research project. Based on ethical approval from the University of Regina and the FHQTC, consent to participate in the research was obtained from the youth or their parents/guardians. Participating youth and the program facilitators generated data. The facilitators were two male community research associates (David Benjoe and Dustin Brass), originally from nearby Anishnabe and Nahiyawak reserves. Both facilitators were experienced high school teachers with expertise in culturally appropriate arts programming. A non-

Indigenous female postdoctoral fellow (Mamata Pandey) sometimes accompanied them. Together, the program facilitators guided group-building activities, taught visual art techniques, held discussions on the topics of identity and wellbeing, and conducted talking circles with youth that typically focused on a health-related theme. Storytelling and sharing circles were used in the project primarily to emphasize relationality and subjective experience (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009).

Program facilitators maintained an audio diary of field notes about their observations of the youth and other experiences implementing the program. These field notes were often recorded as post-session debriefing conversations. At the end of the program, 13 youth—seven female and six male—consented to be interviewed about their art, their experiences of the program, and their ideas about wellbeing. The interviews involved some semi-structured components but also included unstructured conversational interviewing to preserve the authenticity of the interaction (Absolon, 2011). Field notes and interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the program facilitators to discern key features and identify themes arising from the data.

Fourteen youth participated in the weekly program; most identified as Cree. Two youth were in Grade 8, and 12 were in Grades 10 or 11. All students who attended received school credit towards their applied arts class regardless of whether they agreed to be interviewed. This article presents the voices of six of these youth: Jenna, Schmidt, Ashley, Luke, Laurel, and Prentice.[4] Jenna expressed a desire to study law in university. Schmidt liked dancing, listening to music, playing volleyball, and hanging out with friends, all of which helped her "feel better about [her]self." Ashley loved art. Her father was a well-known artist who had a strong influence in her life. Luke talked about becoming a computer technician. He used to dance in powwows and enjoyed basketball, hunting, and hanging out with friends. Laurel was skilled at beading and talked about how her family passed traditional teachings on to her. Prentice had an interest in carpentry.

Results

The youth were co-researchers in this program because the activities stimulated their discovery of self-knowledge. As academic co-researchers, we were interested in what this self-knowledge was and how the artistic process contributed to its discovery. The results of this research are presented in terms of the outcomes of artistic processes and the discoveries that youth said they experienced.

Respectful Relationships: Using Art to Create a "Safe Enough" Space

Foundational to effective pedagogy for Indigenous learners are respectful relationships (Goulet & Goulet, 2014) and the creation of a "safe enough" space for learning (Khaner & Linds, 2015). This study confirms that the arts, along with the process of visual participatory methods,

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[4] Participants' names are pseudonyms, some of which youth chose themselves.

can facilitate the emergence of a safe space while offering a means to safely deal with difficult or traumatic experiences (Archibald & Dewar, 2010). Ensuring a safe enough space is necessary to encourage youths' self-discovery process. Cultural safety in any program involves the redistribution of power so that the knowledge, values, and belief systems of Indigenous Peoples are prioritized in any initiative, practice, or relationship (Brascoupé & Waters, 2009). Indigenous knowledge, pedagogy, and values were centralized throughout the process. However, a culturally safe context does not guarantee an emotionally safe context if participants do not have the confidence to try new things, particularly if they are risking ridicule from their peers. Consequently, program facilitators took the time to build relationships of reciprocal respect and trust with participants, and to reinforce respect between participants. They made conscious efforts to create a safe space within the group characterized by respect: "The important thing … is to show that … we care genuinely and are not here for the sake of collecting data" (Mamata, field notes, March 3, 2014). Respect was demonstrated by listening to youth and expressing interest in their viewpoints, which also reinforced the message that the youth should be respectful of themselves.

Respectful relationships promote trust. Trust formed as facilitators paid attention to and adjusted their behaviour to meet the needs of the participants. For example, Mamata reflected early on in the program:

> *I didn't talk very much today because there were a lot of new people and I wanted them to get settled with the art concepts first before we started talking a lot about the research. … But that's … a matter of building that relationship and making them comfortable, and not pushing them into doing something that they're not ready for.* (Field notes, March 3, 2014)

Doing art requires risk taking, so trust and safety are important aspects of working with the arts and wellness. Engaging in applied theatre with refugee youth in Australia, Hunter (2008) demonstrated that safe space connotes metaphorical safety, where a space that has a specific time or place—much like the after-school art program—instills a sense of comfort and familiarity. The space is just safe enough to take risks in that moment of putting the brush to the canvas or the marker to the paper, and this safety is facilitated by the ambiguity of artwork such that youth can be self-expressive without fully disclosing the contents of their thoughts. In one class session, David was telling the students about how "we're going to use symbols to talk about your story" in the following week. Observing the youth, Dustin indicated the following in his field notes:

> *Some of the students were wondering about if they should be sharing their full story and their true story. David responded, "Well, that's why you use symbols and we're not asking you to talk in front of everyone." It seemed like there was kind of an ease after that was said.* (Field notes, March 31, 2014)

The visual arts in this project were bridged with storytelling so that youth could express their subjectivities within the safety of metaphor and nuance.

The Development of Art Skills and Cultural Values

There is a pedagogical process to art education that encourages students to grow beyond just technical skills. This project gave youth a chance to work with new materials and learn new art techniques, including drawing, painting, and comic book storyboarding. The development of artistic abilities created transferable skills to be used in other life situations, such as planning and story sharing for life learning. Working on a particular piece became a metaphor for other life tasks, which gave the participants a level of competence and instilled confidence. In the program, participants had opportunities to engage in life lessons pertaining to decision-making, perseverance, and even basic values like respect and appreciation. Planning and deliberation are important parts of decision making in visual arts that become readily apparent when undertaking larger projects. Without them, artists will likely encounter unanticipated errors or challenges to their project. Learning to persevere and adjust for these occurrences was part of the artistic process. Luke shared that drawing made him feel good. When pressed as to why, he said, "I draw cool things. Like, things that I never tried drawing before. If I were to start drawing and make a mistake on it, I'd turn that mistake into something else."

One activity required participants to do a series of timed blind contour drawings where youth were not allowed to look at or lift the pencil from the surface of their paper as they copied simple images. In their interviews, David asked youth to reflect on this activity and consider the broader life lessons embedded within.

> David: *Explain to me what I [had you do].*
> Jenna: *You just drew four sketches on the board and then you told us to draw one, each, and one we were getting timed on and we only had to do the outside of the sketch. And then I ended up doing the easy ones first and then it progressed into being, the time limit being shorter* [David laughs] *and then I had the hard ones to do last.*
> David: *What did that teach you?*
> Jenna: *Not to take the easy things first* [both laugh].

As an educator, David designed the art lessons in such a manner to challenge youth while retaining the playfulness of the activities.

The program challenged youth to test out new experiences and to engage in a learning process as they were provided new materials, activities, and projects. The lessons that students took from this process went beyond the superficial technical aspects to a deeper philosophical and value-based learning, such as the use of colours in relation to the medicine wheel or to define one's sense of self. Laurel reflected:

> *When we first started out, I kind of didn't like the whole … drawing thing. But once you started getting the materials and stuff, I got more comfortable with the art and wanted to*

> *do it more, because there was just so many other materials to use, instead of just using, like, one … But I do understand how you wanted us to get, like, a lesson each time so that we know how to respect the materials and stuff because those were given to us by you guys.*

The uniqueness of this arts-based program may be attributed to the Indigenous approach to experiential and relational learning. This approach is evident in David's interviews, in which youth were encouraged to reflect on what they were learning about themselves through their art.

Expressing Cultural and Individual Identities

Art is a traditional form of expression for Indigenous Peoples that links culture, self, and wellness through confidence building and the exploration of identity (Archibald & Dewar, 2010). Some of the youth picked up on this resonance between selfhood and art:

> *We all have our own story and we have, like, our own understanding of stuff. So if you were to put it into your artwork, like, that's what creates it, like your own piece and your own personality and your own feelings. Like everything you do goes into your art.*
> (Laurel)

Identity is not limited just to individuals. It involves feelings of belonging, shared group values, and differentiating oneself from others, so it is "formed and shaped through a process of mutual constitution with others and within various social and cultural contexts" (Schouls, 2003, p. 425). This topic emerged early in the program as the facilitators observed youth conversing during the activities:

> *I was starting to notice the words that [some boys] were producing were about identity, so … when they would throw out a term, even if they just did it as teenage boys do and blurted it out, I wanted to address it. Later, I'd either bring it up in a conversation or talk about it right there. But I'm starting to find that they're starting to look at identity and what does that actually truly mean.* (Mamata, field notes, March 24, 2014)

The relational aspect of identity is the reason it is important to conduct this type of programming in a group setting. The process of natural group interactions in a safe enough space facilitated the exploration of identity between peers that was readily observable by the program facilitators.

Artistic self-expression revealed the connection between participants' individual identities, their cultural teachings and activities, and the close relationships they had with familial role models. Schmidt drew from her knowledge of the Cree language to produce her comic storyboard (Figure 1). Some participants had familial role models that directly inspired their engagement in art and drew their attention to the connection between art, relationships, and wellbeing. Ashley was one such youth:

> *The big eagle that my dad made would bring me back to him making that while I'll be making this. … Putting almost, like, every day into his artwork and he would just, like, get lost in his work and everything. He wouldn't know what time of day it is because he would get lost in it every time.*

These connections to culture and family are central to youths' wellbeing. Having a strong sense of self and cultural continuity, so that a person can visualize possible or hoped-for futures, is a key factor in maintaining feelings of belonging, fostering resilience to adversity, and preventing suicide in Indigenous youth (Chandler & Lalonde, 2009).
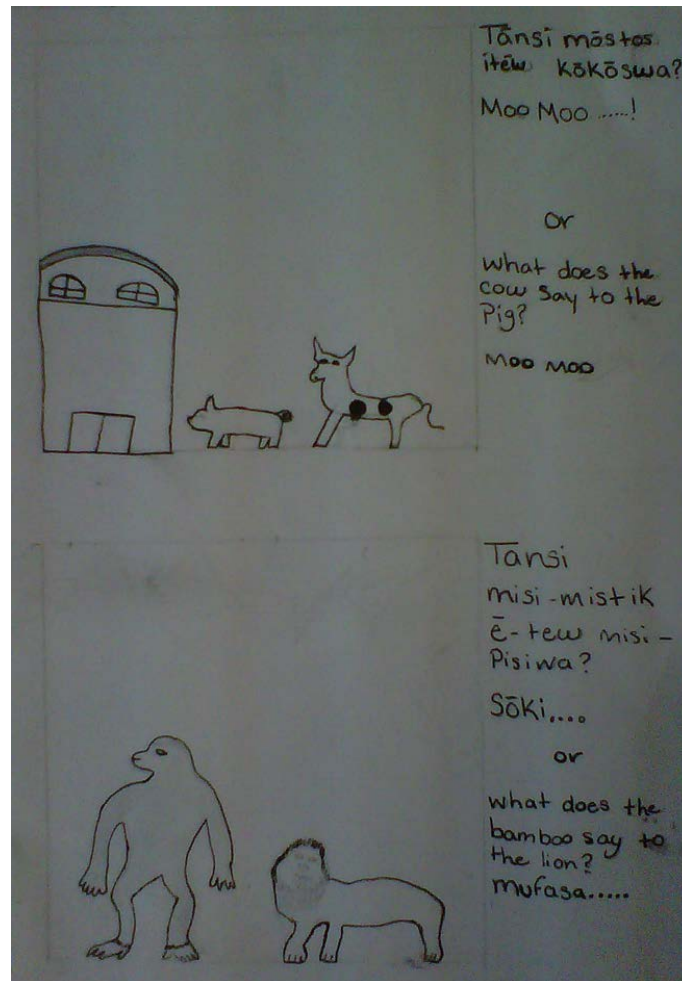

Figure 1. **Comic storyboard.**

Laurel drew a collection of images that included a traditional dancer with flowers and a geometric design (Figure 2). When explaining the meaning of her work, she made clear connections between culture, identity, and cultural continuity. Laurel spoke of traditional teachings and her relationship with her grandfather: "I was taught, like, if you were to have a dream about something, like a type of design or ... jingle dress, you have to draw the design right

away, so you won't forget. And then [you can] ... make use of that design." When David inquired about her choice of composition, Laurel explained:

> *I remember having that dream of that [geometric] design that was at the top of the paper so I wanted to include it in there ... I wanted this [picture] to kind of represent myself because my Indian name is "[___] Woman." So my animal, my grandpa said it was the horse, and if I was ever to bead something or make something for myself to always include something with a horse in it. And the flowers just ... represent the earth.*

Figure 2. **Traditional dancer.**

In our experience, participation in arts-based programming can facilitate youths' self-knowledge through their self-expression, the navigation of technical challenges, and discussions or other social interactions occurring in the context of one's work. For some participants, that self-knowledge was connected to a sense of place within the community and the natural environment. Ashley described her artwork:

> *It's a wolf sitting on a hill and trees surrounding it, pine trees. It's very dark out. There's a tree leaning towards the wolf and I made it kind of look like northern lights, touching the sky, kind of going from dark to light.*

"Why a wolf?" David asked. "Because," Ashley responded, "it kind of represents the reserve. Represents, like, me." Ashley's description of her wolf symbolism underscores how closely connected individual and cultural identity is interwoven in her identity. The wolf seems to

represent both herself and her First Nation community, both coexisting as two inseparable entities. Sense of place is an important part of identity, and particularly so for many Indigenous people (Wilson & Peters, 2005). In Ashley's picture, she placed herself within the natural environment of her First Nation, which suggests her sense of self is connected to a sense of place filled with natural beauty. Self-knowledge was clearly connected to cultural identity and the important relationships youth had in their lives. While it was at times difficult for youth to explain why they produced the art that they did, it is evident they were drawn to more symbolic means of self-expression that asserted their identities as Indigenous people and maintained cultural continuity.

Decolonizing Racialized Representations

Art also gave participants a means to challenge colonized images of Indigeneity and reconstruct culturally appropriate images. Jenna had recently watched the documentary *Reel Injun* (Diamond, Bainbridge, & Hayes, 2009), which details how Indigenous people have been represented by the film industry. Consequently, she decided to reimagine Disney's stereotyped and sexualized representation of an "Indian princess" into an image that was much closer to her experience as a young Cree woman. David asked Jenna what stood out for her in the program:

> *I guess expressing yourself. 'Cause I remember I did a picture of a modern Pocahontas and I drew her body and figure and everything. But I put different clothes on her. I put a ribbon skirt on her and she had a long-sleeved shirt on and she, like, wasn't so skanky[5] looking like she is in the actual movie.*

Jenna described her version of Pocahontas as "more modern … wearing beading … moccasins … and standing in the woods." Jenna's Pocahontas reflected a contemporary cultural identity that retained traditional cultural markers while negating the too often hyper-sexualized representation of Indigenous women and the "Indian princess" stereotype.

Schmidt also challenged the lack of positive images of Indigeneity in popular culture. She created a comic book character called "Super Native" (Figure 3) and described her thoughts about her creation:

> *That's pretty cool, adding the Aboriginal ... culture into it because you don't really see comic books of Aboriginals. It's always about, like, the white people and their ways and their jokes. So I just figured that I'd try to add my own, and just try to put it into there.*

By using their art to challenge the lack of positive images of Indigenous people in the mainstream media, youth appeared to be taking control of their own decolonizing processes as their self-knowledge expanded.
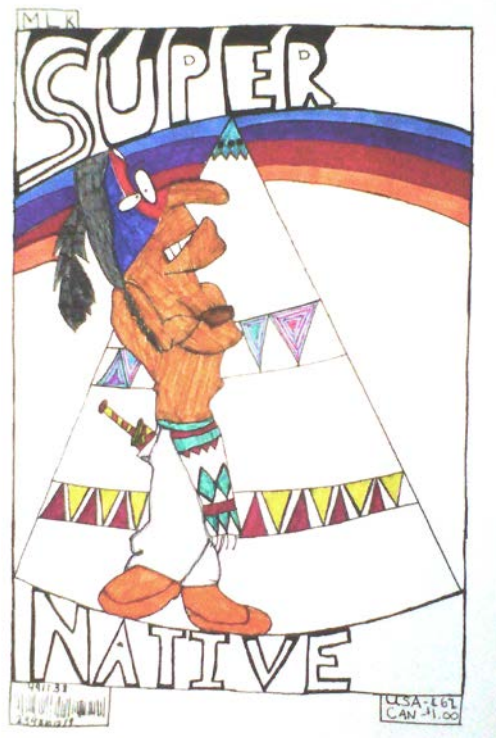
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[5] *Skanky* is slang for immoral or promiscuous.

Figure 3. **Super Native.**

Program Impact on Wellbeing

The arts program was well received by youth. Overall, youth indicated that their participation induced positive feelings. Jenna said, "It gave me something to look forward to, to come to school and that you are going to be doing something with your hands and get dirty and have fun." Youth could reveal feelings that they would not normally express. When asked to describe how art contributed to his wellbeing, Prentice said, "When I was drawing a picture, all the things I couldn't say to anyone were in the picture." Some participants made direct connections to self-expression and mental wellbeing. When asked about the benefits of art, Laurel responded, "Yeah, it helps sometimes. Like when you have so much on your plate and you kind of just, like, want a break and everything. It just helps, like, for you to express your feelings into, like, a piece of art."

Laurel intuitively recognized how participation in arts activities facilitated resilience by providing a means of coping with personal difficulties. She demonstrated insight and self-knowledge that was connected to her previous experiences of artistic expression through the traditional activity of beadwork.

> *[Beading] is something I really excel in and … enjoy. … It, like, relaxes me. … Some*
> *people say, "Oh, it's so time consuming and it's so hard." But … if you're going to*
> *balance out everything and, like, be able to do the stuff you do, like, you've got to have a*

> *balance to everything. Because you can get so lost in a project and just, like, forget about it.*

Maintaining balance between the different aspects of our lives is a core value of Indigenous conceptions of wellbeing (Hart, 2002). Laurel understood the benefits of artistic practice because she already engaged in different artistic endeavours. Other youth, however, may not have had such opportunities owing to dramatic underfunding for any academic programming in First Nations communities, let alone arts-based programming (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012). This project was able to bring the arts to youth who might not otherwise have been able to learn about visual arts techniques and thus also exposed them to the connection between wellbeing and the artistic process in a manner that facilitated the growth of their self-knowledge.

Reflections and Limitations

Arts-based research is important for documenting successful health activities and effective research strategies, and for communicating the effectiveness of the arts in health education with Indigenous youth. Although arts-based programming is a promising research method that can promote self-knowledge and wellbeing among Indigenous youth, it is important to note that this program was developed within a particular context, and any future applications should consider the community's and the youths' unique situations and histories. The success of this programming was very dependent upon the facilitators' experiences and cultural knowledge that enhanced the programming and the relationships they developed with and among the students.

Although positive short-term outcomes were evident, our goal to identify longer-term outcomes of arts programming on wellbeing remain elusive. We recognize that longer follow-up time is required to document long-term effects of visual arts programming. Also, because this research is based on a small group of mostly Anishnabe and Nahiyawak (Cree) students, ideally it could be scaled up to more communities and students, preferably with additional cultural backgrounds.

Concluding Comments

Wellness promotion through participatory visual methods engages youth in programming that promotes the development of *kiskenimisowin* (self-knowledge). Arts activities have potential to connect with Indigenous youth in ways that can complement conventional research methodologies as youth are empowered to make their own meaning of their lives. The arts provide the skills and a safe enough space for youth to partake in self-expression, to discover their individual and cultural identities, and to consider the meanings of their cultural expressions in the context of positive social interactions with peers and adult role models. These findings build upon the beneficial outcomes already noted in other arts-based programming for Indigenous youth.

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