Āhkamēyimowin: Walking Together

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Abstract

This exploratory study was materialized through community involvement establishing a community-university partnership with the Girl Power Program at Sturgeon Lake First Nation, Saskatchewan. Girl Power is an after-school program that helps girls between the ages of 10 and 15 to mitigate risk factors including sexual violence and abuse, parental neglect, and teenage pregnancy. This community-based participatory research project guided by *āhkamēyimowin* (perseverance in Plains Cree) studies how girls involved in the Girl Power Program described the concept of *mamāhtāwicikew* (empowerment in Plains Cree). The purpose of this research is to illuminate the experiences of girls in relation to empowerment, as well as roadblocks to empowerment, in order to discover strategies used to foster empowerment and to identify opportunities for community development.

This participatory study utilized youth engagement, and was co-facilitated and co-designed by a 15-year-old Senior Mentor in the Girl Power Program, as determined by the adult allies and the girls' in the Girl Power Program. Overall, ten girls participated, who were between the ages of 10 and 12. Arts-based methods were employed so that the girls created an 'Empowerment Blueprint', symbolizing a visual representation of empowerment in their lives. Participatory analysis was used, and the findings highlighted the importance of including First Nation girls' voices in the design and delivery of empowerment initiatives. Further, the importance of collaborative value-based research methods in mobilizing girls' commitment towards social change grounded in their experiences of empowerment, and overcoming roadblocks to empowerment through co-creating community solutions.

The benefits of this study were to illuminate how girls at Sturgeon Lake First Nation experience various influences that shape their daily lives, and how they characterized these

influences either as empowering, or as roadblocks to empowerment. To address the roadblock of

hunger, the Sturgeon Lake Central School and ACCESS Open Minds Youth Centre partnered to

develop a youth garden. The research highlighted the role that young adults play in facilitating

empowerment through research in community development.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

In Canada, alternative approaches such as youth engagement and empowerment have emerged in the mental healthcare system compared to the top down delivery of health services. There is also growing recognition that youth programs and services, as a result of top-down approaches, are not adequately meeting the needs of Indigenous youth (Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, Burns, Camillo, 2010). Therefore, the aim of the study was to explore empowerment through a Plains Cree perspective with youth co-designing community mental health services to develop a contextualized community definition. Youth engaged in participatory research processes and transformative learning is a collaborative and iterative approach to research that addresses youth-identified needs through the recognition of individual strengths in communities in order to facilitate transformational change (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Torre, Fine, Alexander, & Genao, 2007). Transformational change in the context of this thesis provided an opportunity for mutual learning, building on the strengths of a First Nation community to best support youth development.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) advocates for the engagement of children in research and policy development (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). A child means every human under the age of 18 years. The CRC applies to all children; however, the CRC was the first core human rights treaty providing recommendations to include Indigenous children, explicitly in provisions, given their unique circumstances (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). The implementation of the rights of Indigenous children framework aligns with Indigenous peoples' repeated call for self-determination to address the insufficient access to health programs by Indigenous peoples (Blanchet-Cohen, McMillan, & Greenwood, 2011; Carson, Dunbar,

1

Chenhall, & Bailie, 2007). The general comments of the CRC (2016) integrates a provision on health services to be community-based from inception to implementation of service delivery. Co-creating programming and services with communities implements the delivery of culturally appropriate services (Blanchet et al., 2011; Cook, 2008).

The CRC (2016) describes empowerment of Indigenous children as the "effective exercise of their rights to culture, religion and language to provide an essential foundation of a culturally diverse State…" (p. 19). This is also consistent with the World Health Organization's (WHO) social determinants of health, which recognizes empowerment as essential to operationalizing the right to health (Blanchet et al., 2011; Canadian Council on Social Determinants of Health, 2013; Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008; Li, Mattes, Stanley, McMurray, & Hertzman, 2009). However, little research has explored empowerment from a Plains Cree perspective. The study of translating empowerment and communicating cultural constructs has been under investigation since the word first emerged in the literature in the 1980s (Chaves, Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein, 2008). The operationalization of empowerment from a multicultural perspective challenges the development of health education and health promotion programs that are often developed from a top-down approach (Chaves et al., 2008).

A central construct throughout this research is *āhkamēyimowin*, or persistence in Plains Cree, that provides strength to overcome adversity. This research focuses on the tenacity of Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous girls, to overcome societal, political, and economic adversity within their communities. Fundamental to āhkamēyimowin is strength, protection, relationality, spirituality, self-care, hope, and a sense of purpose. For Indigenous girls, healing begins with being listened to and acknowledged. This research creates a space for healing.

Roadmap for the Journey

Over the course of my life, my mother has demonstrated her strength, resiliency, patience, and determination, which motived me to not accept the status quo. My mom's modeling of spiritual wellness has helped me develop my own spiritual well-being. From a young age, I was always encouraged to be open-minded, and to find a passion that was reflective of who I was as a person. I was always on the pursuit of wanting to do better for the world, and was drawn to the helping profession. My interests of creating an equitable world guided my educational training in Psychology, as well as my interest in working with Indigenous communities. My belief is that youth are the leaders of today, and we need to co-create positive health and well-being initiatives with them. Canadians have a moral responsibility to educate and train the next generation of youth to be leaders. To co-facilitate transformational change, researchers and communities must work together to find solutions to help create more equitable health and well-being outcomes.

Understanding Indigenous youth mental health in Canada is complex, and requires spending time in the community to build reciprocal and trusting relationships. Following the Tri Policy Statement (TCPS-2): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, Chapter 9 (Government of Canada, 2015), this research was co-created through an ethical space for dialogue and points of differences of the research team (e.g., community members and academics) to ensure the research was of reciprocity. Through storytelling and perseverance, I was able to build trusting relationships. Throughout my active presence at Sturgeon Lake First Nation during the summer of 2016, I established strong authentic relationships with youth, community members, the health centre, and school staff. It was foundational to have the youth trust me to be a partner in conducting research with them, and in an authentic way. This research

originated from my direct experience of working at Sturgeon Lake First Nation, and it was evident early on that it was easy for the girls in the community to connect with me. This research was a collaborative effort to unveil a Sturgeon Lake First Nation empowerment model that incorporates how Sturgeon Lake girls illuminated their understanding of empowerment.

This research builds upon the community's traditional knowledge, and integrates theories from community psychology, youth participatory research, and relationality to influence youth community development at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. The community profile of Sturgeon Lake First Nation is outlined in Chapter Two, thus grounding the research in the local context. The description of two main on-reserve service providers (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre and Sturgeon Lake Central School) is provided to illuminate the community's philosophy in developing, implementing, and providing services for youth through Plains Cree teachings, values, and beliefs. Although these organizations are governed separately, they work in collaboration to provide youth empowerment programs. Together, they facilitate the Girl Power Program and ACCESS Open Minds; both which are explained to contextualize this research project. The Chapter ends with the explanation of the word āhkamēyimowin and how it guided the research project.

In Chapter Three, the existing literature on youth empowerment programs and the key factors to successfully develop positive youth empowerment programs, specifically for Indigenous youth, are reviewed. Facilitation of empowerment is explained, positioning the chosen methodology of the research project. This Chapter also examines the importance of co-creating health and well-being programs by utilizing an empowerment framework; a strength-based approach to promote positive lifestyles. The Chapter concludes with the research context to frame the project within the āhkamēyimowin of local people and local contexts.

The design and construction of the research project is explained in Chapter Four. An overview of Youth Participatory Research (YPR), Empowerment Theory, and Relationality are described. The weaving of YPR, Empowerment Theory and Relationality in a way that models āhkamēyimowin is examined. The Chapter concludes with the research process through transformative action-oriented methods.

Findings from the research are provided in Chapter Five. This Chapter begins with the contextualization of mamāhtāwicikew as gifted by one of Sturgeon Lake's Traditional Knowledge Keepers, Ms. Sandra Kingfisher. Next is the girls' description of being a girl, and their experiences of empowerment, and barriers to empowerment. The girls' identified solutions to overcoming barriers to empowerment are discussed. The final and concluding portion of the chapter is the behavioural observations from the primary researcher on the girls' behavior throughout the research project in order to identify any perceived changes in their confidence. It includes a reflection from Miss Sundown, a Senior Mentor in the Girls Power Program and co-researcher, on her experiences of co-facilitating the research project.

A discussion of the findings is provided and situated within the local knowledge of the community, and the body of literature on empowerment and youth empowerment programs, are outlined in Chapter Six. A self-reflection is provided to contextualize the overall iterative research process, as well as a way to contextualize āhkamēyimowin within the study. The transformative action-oriented loops of the project are identified and explained. The Chapter concludes with the limitations of the study.

An overall Summary/Conclusion of the study is provided in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Two: Sturgeon Lake First Nation

Sturgeon Lake First Nation, No. 101, is a signatory of Treaty 6 with the Crown, located approximately 55 kilometers northwest of the closest urban center, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The community has an on-reserve population of approximately 2200 people. Sturgeon Lake First Nation has an overall young population, with approximately 700 youth between the ages of 11 and 25 residing on-reserve, which is a disproportionate number compared to the rest of the population. The main artery for on-reserve traffic is known as Sturgeon Lake Road, and connects the two core areas: East and West. Most of the institutional buildings on-reserve are near the West Core area, with the East Core area being the larger residential area. Besides school buses and a medical van, there is no formal transportation connecting the two areas. The community provides numerous on-reserve services and programs, but this thesis focuses on the Girl Power Program provided in partnership by the Sturgeon Lake Health Centre and Sturgeon Lake Central School. An overview of both the Health Centre and Central School is included to provide context for the development of youth empowerment programs on-reserve.

Sturgeon Lake Health Centre

Sturgeon Lake First Nation has taken a leadership role, being at the leading edge of change. It was one of the initial First Nation communities in Saskatchewan to negotiate the transfer of responsibility for First Level Health Services with Health Canada in 1995 (Moore et al., 2006). The goal of the health transfer was to develop community health services that reflect, as well as incorporate, Indigenous traditions into all community health programs and services (Moore et al., 2006). The self-determination of the community's leadership for the health transfer was to fundamentally change the attitude of community members from passive acceptance of problems, to one of transforming the living conditions in the community.

Sturgeon Lake First Nation provides a community-based holistic approach to wellness, integrating a Western chronic care model with the First Nations Medicine Wheel concepts (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, n.d.). The Sturgeon Lake Health Model is grounded in the young people of the community (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, n.d.). The Elders in the community believe that wellness starts with the young people, and that traditional healing in a contemporary community is based on the whole community being responsible for raising children through cultural continuity. The Elders of Sturgeon Lake define cultural continuity as the process of empowering youth to make their own decisions in the future (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, n.d.). Sturgeon Lake First Nation uses a patient empowerment model in designing health services. For example, people who attend the traditional parenting classes choose the class topics (Moore et al., 2006). Patient empowerment in this context increases the role of patients, thereby enhancing the quality of care. Patient engagement in co-designing and co-creating health services and programing leads to the development and implementation of responsive programs that meet the needs and preferences of patients.

Sturgeon Lake Central School

Sturgeon Lake Central School provides on-reserve education from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The school's goals are to strengthen community involvement, and to develop and foster approaches to Cree language and cultural instructions that build positive student behaviours (Sturgeon Lake First Nation, n.d.). The Plains Cree language is important to the community as it contains many of their cultural teachings, values, and morals. Most community members speak Plains Cree; however, youth are not fluent. In order to support and encourage youth to speak the language, Plains Cree was integrated into all classrooms from Kindergarten to Grade 12 in September of 2017. The school provides after-school activities grounded in the Plains Cree

culture, including beading, drumming, music lessons, and ribbon skirt-making. Although the Health Centre and Central School provide separate programming, they partner on projects that provide youth empowerment programs to help youth live balanced and positive lifestyles.

Sturgeon Lake Youth Empowerment Programs

The Health Centre and Central School are partnering in the development and implementation of youth empowerment programs on-reserve to promote positive mental health/wellness. Sturgeon Lake is dedicated to changing the way youth feel about themselves by developing their self-confidence, their sense of cultural identity, and developing positive coping mechanisms. Collectively, they are transforming and developing services based on the principles of mamāhtāwicikew (empowerment), kihcēyihtamowin (respect), tapahtēyimisowin (humility), and pakosēyimowin (hope). Sturgeon Lake's most valuable change to youth mental health services is the adoption of holistic approaches to care that provide youth the opportunity for self-discovery. Thus, self-discovery encourages youth to recognize their gifts and abilities and to live a positive lifestyle. Sturgeon Lake is leading transformation of community mental health services by authentically engaging youth in the process of transformation through projects such as ACCESS Open Minds.

ACCESS Open Minds

This thesis was a sub-project funded within the Sturgeon Lake First Nation ACCESS Open Minds under Dr. Ashok Malla, McGill University, with the Saskatchewan Principal Investigator being Dr. Caroline Tait. The following information was retrieved from the ACCESS Open Minds website (2017). ACCESS Opens Minds is a national research project with 14 research sites, positively transforming how youth access mental health services in Canada through a paradigm shift. Their vision of a healthcare paradigm shift in Canada is encompassed

within their name: Adolescent/young Adult, Connections to Community-driven, Early, Strengths-based and Stigma-free Services (ACCESS). It was the first pan-Canadian research network of the Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and is jointly-funded by the Graham Boechk Foundation, known as the Transformational Research in Adolescents Mental Health. The goal is to create positive change through evidence-based research and pragmatic interventions within five years, in the way young people (ages 11 to 25) access mental health services. ACCESS Open Minds is currently the largest national youth mental health project in Canada, with over 300 people – youth, family/caregivers, service providers, researchers, members of community organizations, and policymakers from across the country, participating in implementing changes in Canadian youth mental health services.

Sturgeon Lake First Nation became a part of ACCESS Open Minds as the community's Elders believed that a healthy community starts with empowering youth through cultural continuity (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, n.d.). The Elders stated that communicating with youth will require a format that works in the present, contemporary context that is not grounded in the past (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, n.d.). The Elders also believed that views about health change from generation to generation, therefore youth's involvement, was crucial to the continuity of the health services system (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, n.d.). The process of how youth become empowered in the context of Sturgeon Lake First Nation has been identified as a priority by the community and the Health Centre (Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, n.d.).

In summary, Sturgeon Lake First Nation seeks to change the way youth feel about themselves by developing their self-confidence, their sense of cultural identity, and teaching them valuable skills and positive coping behaviours. The project also ensures that youth have a

welcoming safe space to talk with peers about mental health; as well as, to help them access culturally-appropriate and youth-friendly mental health services. Transformational change is being carried out in direct collaboration with young people from the community. Despite the slow process of getting youth engaged, it was imperative to engage youth where they are, and not to lose sight of this goal. Meeting youth where they are was a core believe of developing and facilitating the Girl Power Program introduced to the community in 2009.

The Girl Power Program

The Girl Power Program, funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation, was designed to assist girls with mitigating risk factors related to sexual violence and abuse, parental neglect, and teenage pregnancy. It also aims to break cycles of violence and neglect by empowering girls to achieve their full potential through enhancing their self-esteem (Canadian Women's Foundation, n.d.). The Girl Power Program promotes self-esteem through a variety of cultural, educational, and recreational activities co-designed by, and with, girls. This program builds on the girls' individual and collective strengths by creating a safe space that promotes healthy lifestyle choices and offers positive role modeling behaviours. The goal is to empower girls to think positively about themselves, their community, and their future (Canadian Women's Foundation, n.d.).

Ms. Kingfisher, Knowledge Keeper and co-facilitator of this research project and the Girl Power Program, gifted the word āhkamēyimowin. Āhkamēyimowin facilitates healing both individually and collectively. This word guided the research project as we focused on the perseverance and strength of Indigenous women through learning about teachings, ceremonies, and rites of passage. Through positive reinforcement and supportive role models, girls were taught that challenges are never too large to overcome, and that there will always be someone to

10

walk beside them. Girls were also taught about āhkamēyimowin, giving up is not an option to

life, and that we must continue to do our best and live healthy, positive lives.

Chapter Three: Youth Empowerment Literature Review

This chapter presents a broad overview of youth empowerment programs, key factors in the successful development of positive youth empowerment programs, and the facilitation process for empowerment. The chapter concludes by examining how youth empowerment programs can help transform mental health services in Canada through hope and āhkamēyimowin. The youth development literature is examined for best-practice in designing youth empowerment programs, and the positive outcomes that youth may experience through participation. This discussion seeks to identify what is already known about empowerment to contextualize the current research project within the broader literature on youth empowerment. Framing this research within the context of empowerment, places the emphasis on āhkamēyimowin of local people and the local context.

Youth Empowerment Programs

As this thesis focuses on youth empowerment programs, primarily for youth between the ages of 10 and 15 years, it is important to describe the critical development periods: middle childhood and adolescence. Middle childhood, commonly-defined as the stage between the ages of 6 and 12 (Eccles, 1999), is characterized by a major shift in social and emotional behaviour. Children begin to develop their personal identity and self-concept, which influences their success later in life (Eccles, 1999). Adolescence is a unique development period that occurs between the ages of 12 and 18, marked by the onset of puberty. This is an important transitional stage due to the enormity of emotional and self-esteem development that occurs (Smith, 2015). It is also a time when relationships are formed, rules and cultural norms are tested, and risk behaviours are experimented with (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Ruland, 2005). This thesis does not assume that these stages of development are similarly-categorized in Indigenous cultures, or that they occur

at the same age as do cultural and social norms (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). Although cultural differences may exist, developing one's self-esteem, as well as feeling empowered, are crucial for the well-being of youth (Bleidorn et al., 2015).

Youth empowerment programs provide a structure for a participatory processes that are intended to lead to empowerment outcomes (e.g., agency, self-determination, self-efficacy, self-esteem; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Morton & Montgomery, 2011; Morton & Montgomery, 2013). Youth are included in the decision-making process about the design, interventions, implementation, evaluation of programs, and policies that concern them (Morton & Montgomery, 2011). Youth participation in formal decision-making can include serving on committees, councils, boards, workgroups, or in staff positions (Morton & Montgomery, 2011). Adult involvement in youth empowerment programs is in a supportive facilitative role, in which youth have access to a supportive adult or older youth leader (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016; Jennings et al., 2006; Morton and Montgomery, 2011). From the perspective of young people, supportive adult relationships are based less on the professional qualification of the program staff, and more on their attitudes towards youth (National Research Council, 2002). Historically, youth programs were often offered as a 'solution' or as rehabilitation for keeping youth out of trouble (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016; Jennings et al., McLoughlin, 2006; Morton & Montgomery, 2011); however, empowerment focuses on developing and strengthening capacity, participation, and voice of youth (Bulanda & Johnson, 2016).

The participatory nature of empowerment helps youth develop the skills and positive connections needed to prepare for adulthood. Morton and Montgomery (2011) describe four core processes that lead to youth empowerment: a pro-social environment, adult support, youth

13

involvement in key decision-making, and asset-building activities. Although youth development programs and youth empowerment programs are often used synonymously, differences do exist. For example, youth involvement in decision-making is found in youth empowerment programs, but not in youth development programs (Morton & Montgomery, 2011). Active involvement in decision-making, influences youths' motivation to control, as well as influence, their environment to address key issues of concern according to their lived reality (Zapata-Phelen, Colquitt, Scott, & Livingston, 2009). It appears that a value-based approach, empowerment research, and program development and implementation are more effective than the historical deficit-based interventions that are focused on fixing youth's problem behavior (Morton & Montgomery, 2011).

Youth empowerment programs are effective because they primarily work on life skills (e.g., social skills, self-identity, self-esteem, self-control, and self-efficacy). These skills, or 'emotionally-intelligent' skills, are the most significant predictor of achieving future success in career development and employment (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006, Morton & Montgomery, 2011). For these reasons, explicit Indigenous youth empowerment programs are needed in Canada to address the emotional consequences of colonization and facilitate the building of hope with youth. Through assimilation policies, Indigenous cultural identity has been disrupted (Czapska, Webb, & Taefi, 2008; de Finney, 2014; Elias, Mignone, Hall, Hong, Hart & Sareen, 2012; Sinclair, Smith, & Stevenson, 2006). To better address the intergenerational effects of colonialism in Canada, localized youth empowerment programs must be co-created with Indigenous youth in order to foster hope, as well as to role-model āhkamēyimowin. Intergenerational effects are a result of unprocessed intergenerational trauma, which refers to the transmission of emotional injuries at the interpersonal level (from parent/caregiver to child) via

different modes of transmission (e.g., directly or indirectly; Crooks et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2010). Youth voices when heard and acknowledged within Indigenous perspectives provide healing (Smith, 1999). Part of the healing journey is for youth to begin to see themselves and their communities differently; moving from seeing oneself as wounded to seeing oneself as resilient (Newhouse, 2006).

Facilitation of Youth Empowerment

People cannot be empowered from outside sources; they can only empower themselves with the support of family, peers and other positive supports (e.g., teachers, counsellors, and coaches). Agencies, organizations, and role models can facilitate empowerment through making the space, creating positive conditions, removing barriers, and encouraging positive engagement in activities (Fetterman, 2005). However, empowerment must come from within individuals themselves. The role of facilitator within an empowerment program must be established through trust, authentic engagement, and commitment (Fetterman, 2005). The facilitator minimizes their own contributions, while staying committed to building capacity and ensuring that the group's voice comes first. As well, a key element to facilitation in youth empowerment is supporting active participation by youth. This includes providing non-threatening physical and social spaces that encourage engagement, which is central to individual and collective empowerment, and lays the foundation for future participation (Ermine, 2007). Empowerment occurs through gains in self-confidence. Growth in self-confidence occurs when space is created for youth to discuss challenges with peers, exchange viewpoints, create bonds and trust, and formulate constructive and empowering community development strategies (Fetterman, 2005; Jennings et al., 2006). It is the indirect outcomes that are experienced by participants through active engagement in youth empowerment programs, for example the ability to speak in public, that develops and strengthens

their confidence when sharing ideas and opinions that lead to empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006). This welcoming and safe environment, as described above, needs to be co-created by youth and adult allies.

Adult and peer mentors all play an important role in the positive development of self-esteem. Youth with positive mentors from within and outside of home and school are more likely to develop a more conclusive sense of self (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Guhn, Zumbo, & Hertzman, 2014). Well-designed and implemented mentoring programs are a promising strategy for promoting positive social attitudes and forming relationships, while preventing substance abuse among youth (Crooks et al., 2016; DuBois et al., 2011). Mentoring is a particularly appropriate approach with Indigenous youth as it is conceptually consistent with traditional values and models of learning (Klinck, Cardinal, Edwards, Gibson, Bisanz, & Da Costa, 2005). Informal mentoring has long existed in Indigenous communities; the entire community contributed to raising children and everyone had a role to play in teaching the young (Klinck et al., 2005). Despite the growth in mentoring programs, there is limited literature on mentoring programs that are specific to Indigenous children and youth (Klinck et al., 2005). Although mentoring programs are similar between Eurocentric and Indigenous worldviews, differences do exist, specific to the relationship between the mentor and those being mentored (often called a mentee). Non-Indigenous mentoring programs are often structured around, and focused on, the relationship of the mentor and mentee pair, whereas Indigenous mentoring is more often informal with less of a distinction between mentor and mentee, it is reciprocal. Indigenous learning and mentoring commonly takes place in a group setting (Klinck et al., 2005).

Authentic engagement is key to developing mentoring programs with Indigenous youth as it provides hope. Authentic engagement includes community members, health practitioners,

and researchers alike who develop programs 'with' rather than 'for' youth. This shift in thinking implies respect for the 'knowledge of living experience' (Freire, 1994). While youth empowerment practitioners, including youth themselves, seek to promote empowerment practices, they must remain critically mindful of the structural, cultural and historical barriers that impede the realization of one's potential. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire advocated for a similar stance, suggesting that people need critical hope as a motivating and sustaining force for realizing one's potential (Freire, 1994). Freire (1994) describes hope as "an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings and becomes a distortion of that ontological need" (p. 9). Thus, hopelessness and despair become both the cause and consequence that weakens hope. As a facilitator and mentor in youth empowerment programs, it is paramount to identify opportunities for building hope and encouraging āhkamēyimowin.

Opportunities for Hope

Jacob (2005) describes hope as being social in nature rather than at an individual level - it is a part of the web of social relations which exists within each of us. Hope is not possible as an 'I', but only as a 'we', as it requires a relationship. Hope also empowers us to build relationships of mutuality that looks toward a shared future. What is needed for hope is the creation of pedagogical space. Pedagogical spaces are places of "liberating mutuality" that foster hope in each other, creating equal partnerships. Freire stated in Pedagogy of Hope (1994) that simply dreaming of a better day is not enough - we need to see ourselves as part of the social fabric of responsibilities to collectively work towards transformational change. This social responsibility pushes us to see that we co-exist in a web of social relations in which our actions have positive and negative consequences (Jacob, 2005). Hope as an engaged pedagogy is about researchers

and participants being entirely present, leading to mutual engagement for praxis, and thus transforming particular circumstances into opportunities for change (Freire, 1994).

It is important to provide support and direction to youth that will nurture hope, as they are in a wandering stage (the stage between being a child and an adult), and are trying to discover who they really are. It is important for facilitators of empowerment to nurture their spirit, and guide them to practice self-care and listen to their spirit (Best Start Resource Centre, 2013). When children grow up without support and guidance, they are at-risk youth because they have not been nurtured (Best Start Resource Centre, 2013). Providing space and opportunities for young Indigenous girls to nurture hope and āhkamēyimowin is key for success. For example, girls who feel hopeful about their career and educational opportunities are less likely to become pregnant, as opposed to girls who are discouraged about their future economic success (Best Start Resource Centre, 2013). Āhkamēyimowin is a process for facilitating girls to adapt to the challenges in their lives, to be resilient, and to continue to succeed.

Youth empowerment programs are spaces that allow girls to openly share and access knowledge, while nurturing a sense of hope and belonging in order to mitigate feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Empowerment programs have the function of responding to the disproportioned rates of Indigenous youths with mental health and addictions in Canada (Elias et al., 2012; Mental Health Commission, 2015; Toombs, Kowatch, & Mushquash, 2016). Systems in Canada have been created to disempower First Nation peoples, and have resulted in the internalization of the effects of trauma (Blanchet-Cohen, McMillan, & Greenwood, 2011; Blackstock, 2011a; Greenwood, de Leeuw, Lindsay, & Reading, 2015; MacDonald, Rigillio, & Brassard, 2010). As community researchers, health practitioners, and community members, we must be cognizant of the design of research and services, and of the language we use in its

development. For example, we should be shifting the language we use when co-creating and co-developing research projects and services in order to focus on Indigenous youth promoting wellness activities rather than focusing on the development of Indigenous youth suicide prevention strategies.

Empowerment-based Health and Well-being Programs

Life promotion/wellness is a strengths-based and empowerment-focused approach to helping youth to find their own path to a holistic and meaningful life (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016; Tighe & McKay, 2012). It aims to honour youth's individuality, while building resiliency through their personal strengths, available resources and positive relationships (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016). Life promotion/wellness focuses on culture, spirituality, and community connectedness to harness a sense of belonging, meaning, purpose, and hope for youth, whereas suicide prevention programs generally focus on reducing the rates of suicidal thoughts/ideation and behaviours (Health Canada, 2015; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016). Life promotion/wellness programs align with āhkamēyimowin, as they support youth to overcome adversity. Community members, health practitioners, and community researchers alike, following a strength-based approach, recognize and build upon existing strengths in and with the community. Recognizing community strengths involves encouraging a positive relationship with community members based on hope for the future grounded in an individual's sense of identity and spirit (Health Canada, 2015). First Nation people have said "a connection to spirit (identity, values, and belief) promotes hope" (Health Canada, 2015 p.15). Community-developed youth empowerment programs focus on purpose, hope, belonging, and meaning, while promoting accountability (Health Canada, 2015). They can become naturally

sustainable when aligned with youth's goals and desires, and are life-promoting (McKay, Kõlves, Klieve, De Leo, 2009; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016).

Empowerment-based wellness initiatives need to be co-designed with communities and youth to recognize the historical and contemporary societal, economic and political oppression of Indigenous people in Canada. Indigenous youth face barriers to empowerment as a result of intergenerational trauma. Based on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, for Indigenous girls to achieve self-actualization (achieving one's full potential), they need to secure both basic needs (i.e., physiological and safety) and psychological needs (i.e., esteem, belongingness and love); see Figure 3.1. Although Maslow borrowed the idea of a hierarchy of needs from the Blackfoot people in Alberta (Blackstock, 2011b; Newhouse, 2006), he did not fully incorporate the knowledge, interconnectedness, spirituality, or the context of community when developing the theory. This is often depicted through and within the Medicine Wheel for First Nation peoples (Graham & Stamler, 2010).
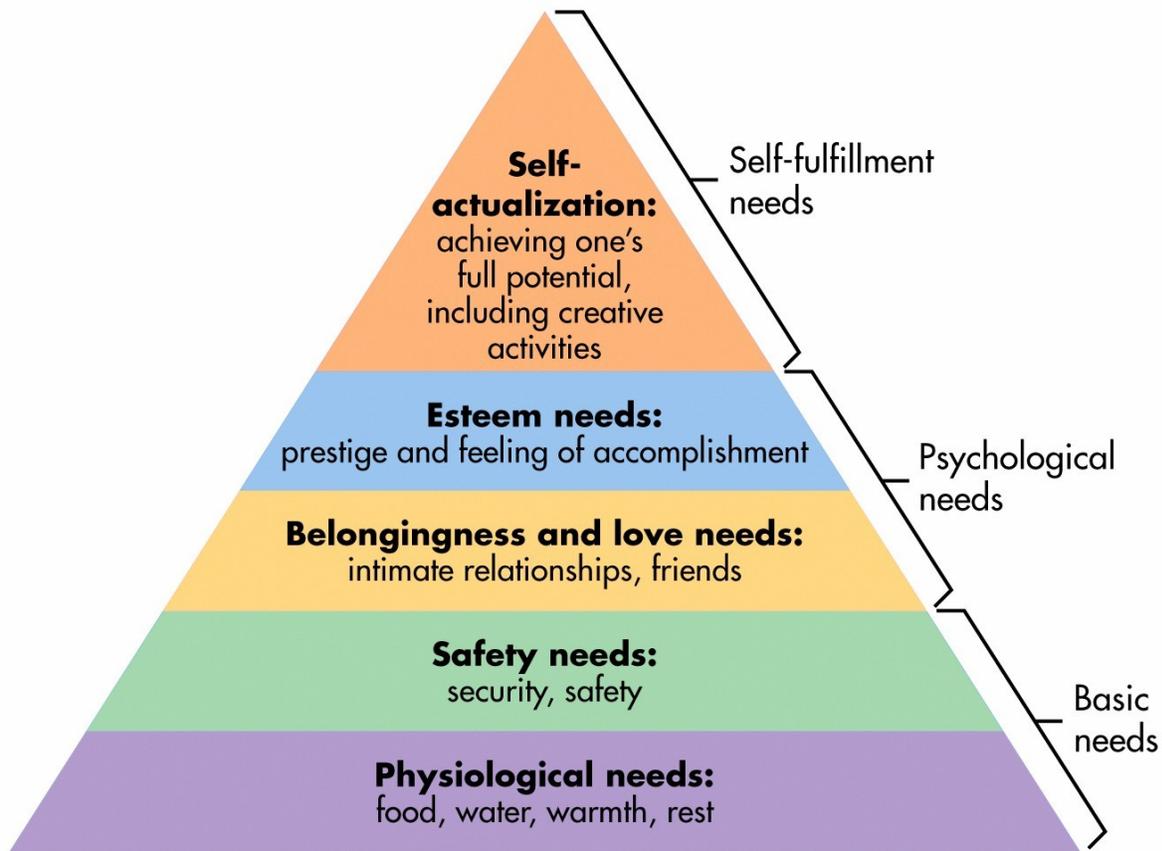
Figure 3.1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs depicts the three categories required by an individual to secure and achieve self-actualization. Retrieved from https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html.

The Medicine Wheel is a model that illustrates the dynamic relationship of the universe (Battiste, 2000). It helps "people to understand things or ideas which often cannot be seen physically" (Hart, 2002, p.39). Although the Medicine Wheel has different meanings for different Indigenous communities, as there is no absolute version, some of the principals are universal (Absolon, 1993; Graham & Stamler, 2010; Sevenson & Lafontaine, 2003). Despite these variations, Sevenson and Lafontaine (2003) inferred "that everything is related to everything else, that things cannot be understood outside of their context and interactions, and that there are four aspects to the human condition-the physical, the emotional, the mental and the spiritual" (p. 190). In relation to 'self-actualization', Mussell (2005) described human needs

through balance and harmony within the Medicine Wheel (i.e., mind, body, emotions, and spirit). Mussell (2005) stated that an individual's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs must be met for the development of human potential and "are required for survival and personal growth" (p. 115). The Medicine Wheel embraces a holistic approach to health and wellness and can be utilized to understand and facilitate empowerment and hope as it provides a model to conceptualize all aspects of the universe.

The community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation defines the Medicine Wheel as a way of life that promotes health and wellness and is grounded in the young people of the community (Figure 3.2.; Sturgeon Lake Health Centre, 2014). Empowerment through teachings received from the community would be a balance in the Medicine Wheel, and the healing process would be viewed as a journey. Good health implies an optimum state of well-being in all four areas, and involves the importance of culture, language and traditions. The model shown in Figure 3.2. illustrates the requirements for survival and personal growth, while accounting for interconnectedness between the four quadrants. Blackstock (2011b) indicated that when we observe the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, they are experienced within the four dimensions (i.e., physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental) and at varying levels (i.e., personal, family, community, and society). Positive health and wellness are ever-evolving within the four dimensions, and at each level of a person's life (e.g., personally, family, community, and society). In this context, it is essential for Indigenous girls to persevere and continue to find their strength and gifts, and to work towards achieving balance. Health and well-being programs, through an empowerment approach, can help Indigenous girls learn about their innate strength through learning and sharing stories on āhkamēyimowin.
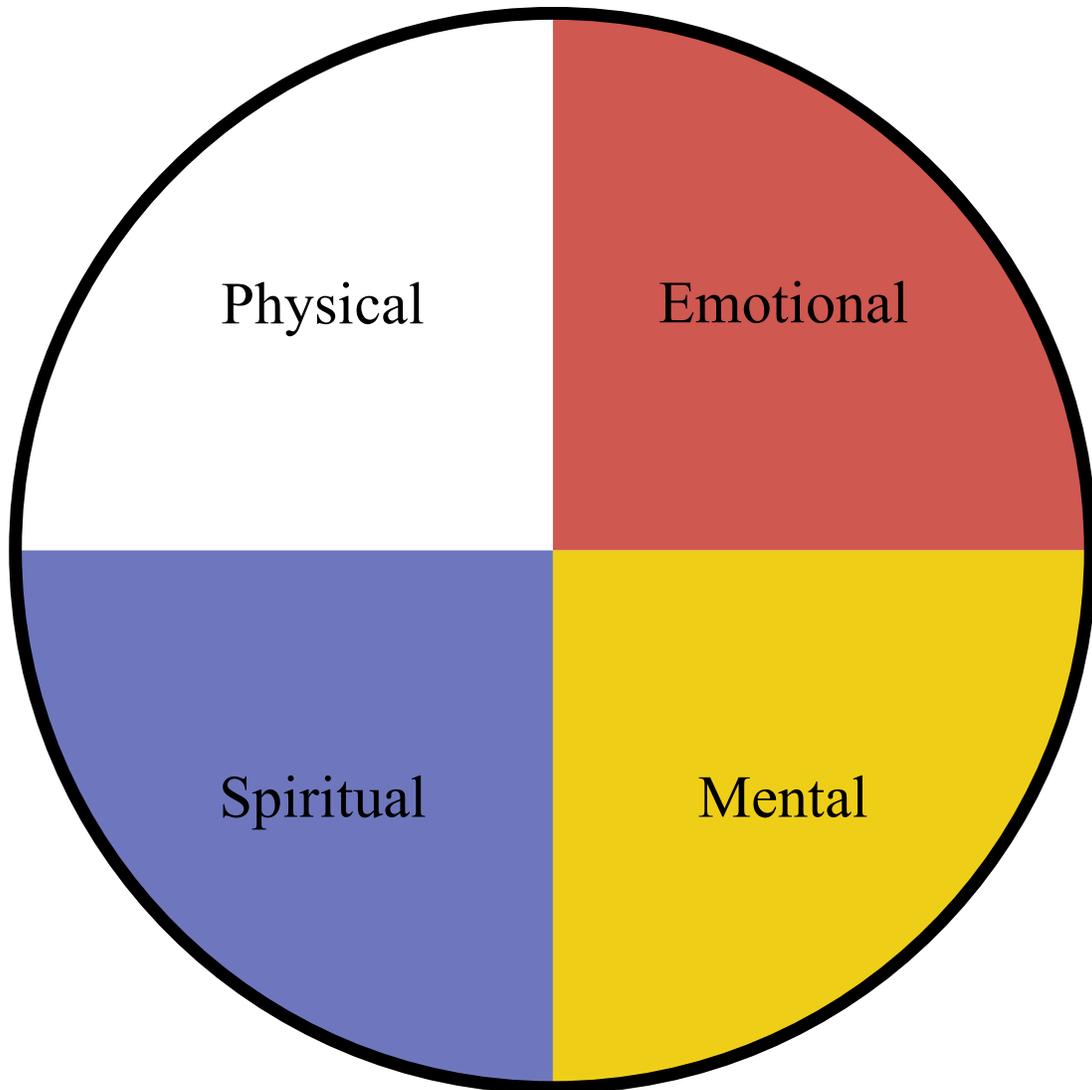
Figure 3.2. Sturgeon Lake First Nation's Medicine Wheel.

Āhkamēyimowin

Settee's (2011) book entitled *The Strength of Women: Âhkamêyimowak*, is a collection of 15 women's stories of āhkamēyimowin, which embodies strength to help women survive and resist oppression through hope, vision, self-empowerment, and finding a sense of purpose. Āhkamēyimowin embodies the strength and drive to succeed, survive, and flourish despite adversity (Settee, 2011). It challenges the notion of hopelessness, as it focuses on the tenacity of the spirit to continue to challenge oppressive structures, and to create positive alternatives

through cultural teachings, language and self-care. Āhkamēyimowin is about having hope and meaningful connections to help guide and mentor people; in the context of this thesis, it would be Indigenous girls. It is role-modeled through holism and the belief of the role of spirituality to help guide and facilitate healing and forgiveness (Settee, 2011).

Story Telling in Indigenous Communities

When co-creating research and Indigenous youth programming for girls, it is important to share stories of strength and perseverance. In Indigenous philosophies, storytelling is a means of transmitting vital information; stories are the lived values of Indigenous culture (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T'lakwadzi, 2009). Storytelling is a ceremony; it is agentic and participatory (Sium & Ritsakes, 2013). Leanna Simpson (2013) shares "spiritual and social practices such as storytelling, the oral tradition, ceremonies, fasting, and gift-giving that are designed to bond people together toward a common understanding" (para. 6). The connectivity that is embodied in storytelling is demonstrating āhkamēyimowin. Given the significance of storytelling accountability, trust and responsibility are key ingredients to storytelling, and in order for stories to be transformative, the storyteller must feel connected, with a sense of intellectual and spiritual responsibility to those with whom they share their stories (Sium & Ritsakes, 2013). This thesis focuses on the strength and persistence of Indigenous girls' within a transformative learning environment.

Research Context

The concept of empowerment as it pertains to Indigenous youth, and particularly Indigenous girls, has yet to be identified and studied in the context of Sturgeon Lake First Nation, or broadly in youth literature framed within a Plains Cree perspective. The scholarly literature suggests that in a research context, empowerment is best-defined by local communities

or participants involved in the research, and that the definition be grounded in the local cultures (Chavez et al., 2008; Samman & Santos, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000). However, most often, empowerment research lacks a localized definition of the construct (Garces-Ozane, Kalu, MAHSR, & Audas, 2016; Maynard, 2008; Mitra, 2004; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Literature indicates that empowerment research generally takes a deductive approach, and is less concerned with the inductive approach (Laverack & Labonte, 2000). In the Euro-western sense, the term empowerment is constructed with an emphasis on power, agency, mastery and control, and is associated with masculinity rather than traits typically associated with femininity, such as community and cooperation (Moritsugu, Vera, Wong, & Duffy, 2013). It is suspected that *mamāhtāwicikew* (Plains Cree for empowerment) will differ from a Euro-western view of empowerment, as it will be relational and based on individual, as well as, community supports rather than on traits of power and control.

Although there has been a long history of resistance to colonialism in First Nation communities in Canada (Brown & Strega, 2005; Kovach, 2005), little has been done to recognize the roles of young girls in these movements, or to understand what empowers them. For example, Shannen Koostachin from Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario had a dream for 'safe and comfy schools', and culturally-based education for First Nation children and youth (First Nation's Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, 2016; Wilson, 2011). More specifically, Shannen's dream was to have a safe and comfy school in Attawapiskat. Her mobilization and determination inspired other youth to speak up about the poor conditions of their schools (e.g., the students were receiving education in an old portable without proper heat). They continued to advocate for a new school even after Shannen was killed in a car accident in 2010 (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, 2016; Wilson, 2011). This dream was achieved when

a new school was built in Attawapiskat in September 2014 due to the collective actions of the youth in the community (Canadian Broadcast Corporation [CBC], 2014; First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, 2016). In 2017, Shannen was named as one of 150 greatest Canadians (CBC, 2017). The story of Shannen's Dream, and the acknowledgement of her work by being named one of 150 greatest Canadians, was an example in this research of First Nation girl empowerment shared with the girls in the Girl Power Program. Therefore, it was important for this project to take place and answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. How does the traditional knowledge keeper in the Girl Power Program conceptualize the concept of mamāhtāwicikew?

2. How do the girls living at Sturgeon Lake First Nation describe empowerment, drawing upon English and Plains Cree descriptions for the term mamāhtāwicikew?

3. What do the girls describe as empowering and identify as program development in their community?

Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework, Methodology and Research Design

This chapter is broken down into two sections: an overview of the theoretical framework and how it informs the current study, and the research process. The chapter starts with contextualizing the project through four methodological and theoretical approaches: youth participatory research, transformative action-oriented methods, empowerment theory, and relationality. The research is then broadly positioned within the literature, narrowing into a discussion of the three methodological and theoretical approaches being woven together to contextualize the methodology of the project. It is also important to note that people flowed in and out of this study as they helped to shape and guide the research process. However, due to work and other commitments, not everyone involved at Sturgeon Lake could participate through to thesis completion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is a hybrid of four methodological and theoretical approaches: youth participatory research (YPR) integrated with transformative action-oriented methods, empowerment theory, and relationality. These concepts influenced the formation of the project, the topic area, the methods, and the outcome (informing the ACCESS Open Minds project). A brief description of these approaches provides context before describing the overlapping regions and positioning of this thesis. There are many factors to consider when facilitating research with Indigenous peoples, therefore through an iterative approach it was discovered by the research team that this hybrid of methodological and theoretical approaches worked most effectively. The four areas, when interwoven, complement each other by addressing and creating a robust exploratory study on how girls from Sturgeon Lake explore the concept of mamāhtāwicikew, while co-engaging in the research process.

Youth Participatory Research (YPR)

YPR falls under the larger field of participatory research. Participatory research is a broad field that uses an extensive range of approaches to empower communities to engage with research, and emphasizes the achievement of community goals while assuming a strengths-based or value-based approach to research (Taylor, Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Davis, & Holtz-Isenberg, 2004; Shannon, 2013). Participatory research is broadly focused on planning and conducting the research process with those whom the research will benefit (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Taylor et al., 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). The characteristics of YPR are similar to those outlined above; however, youth are the active participants in conducting the research.

YPR is a methodology, pedagogy and theory of action for creating social change (Akom et al., 2008). This thesis uses primarily YPR as a research methodology. As a research methodology, YPR has been a process for youth to collectively investigate and respond to the social conditions and structures that influence their lives, amplifying their participation in their community (Torre et al., 2007). YPR moves youth towards praxis by assisting them to develop/enhance their skills (e.g., to speak in authoritative voices, to renegotiate identity as a part of social change, and to envision themselves as change agents in their communities (Scott et al., 2015). It applies a participatory process of equal partners, and values the gifts and knowledge that everyone provides to the research team (Akom et al., 2008). Through integrating transformative action-oriented methods, research helps to build and develop skills within youth through dialogue leading to social action which influences positive change(s). This is done by recognizing youth as the owners of their own learning. Through the co-facilitation of participatory research with transformative action-oriented methods, researchers co-learn with

youth also transform through the process. This transformation facilitates the emergence of authentic research outcomes when compared to a prescriptive research agenda.

Akom and colleagues (2008) provided the fundamental elements in conducting YPR, as follows:

- participatory and youth-driven;
- cooperative, engaging youth and adults in a joint research process in which each contributes equitably;
- foregrounds race, racism, gender, and other axes of social difference in research design, data collection, and analysis;
- challenges traditional paradigms, methods, and texts;
- committed to co-learning and co-facilitating;
- trans-disciplinary, drawing on Black/Africana studies, Raza Studies, Ethnic Studies, Critical Media Literacy, and Women's Studies, to name a few;
- involves a local capacity building;
- an empowering process through which all participants can increase control of their lives;
- seeks a balance between critical thinking, reflection, analysis, and action;
- emphasizes a union of mind, body, and spirit rather than a separation of these elements (p. 6).

As outlined above, YPR provides a radical shift from traditional notions of research, as it allows youth to study their own social contexts and to identify ways to improve their social conditions. YPR places emphasis on the collective initiative in which youth, who have been historically excluded from research projects, are co-facilitating the process (Akom et al., 2008; Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Tuck, 2009).

Traditionally, researcher(s) are separated from their participants and generate their ideas of what research questions to ask; they then provide recommendations for programs/services (Taylor et al., 2004). YPR trains youth to conduct research to improve their lives, communities, and institutions intended to serve them by assisting them to think critically about social injustices and inequalities that they experienced (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). YPR has been successful with Indigenous youth (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Johnston-Goodstar & Sethi, 2013; Johnston-

Goodstar, Trininidad & Solomon, 2010; Korteweg & Bissell, 2016; Tuck, 2009). Studies have shown that YPR is appropriate for Indigenous youth when it is used to co-create, and in a culturally-reflective way (Healey, 2001). This approach to research has demonstrated positive outcomes in Indigenous youth: development of healthy Indigenous identities, increased participation, socio-political awareness, acquisition of research skills, and engagement in social change (Johnson-Goodstar, 2013).

Indigenous peoples in Canada have diverse and rich cultural backgrounds. Culture encompasses a shared way of being and communicating (Cabassa & Baumann, 2013; Singer, 2012). Local scholar, Willie Ermine (2015), describes the Indigenous worldview as founded on a search for meaning: a metaphysical, implicit and subjective journey for knowledge. Cultural imperatives influence Indigenous people's actions and beliefs, as they are learned, integrated, and applied through traditional teachings and participation in ceremonies (McIvor, Napoleon, & Dickie, 2009; Poonwassie & Charter, 2001). Language is important as it is a transmission of crucial cultural knowledge and promotes cultural diversity. Language and culture are intertwined; however, language is an indicator of cultural coherence (McCarty & Zepeda, 2010; Whalen, Moss, & Baldwin, 2016). Indigenous language is integral to spirituality, as it reinforces cultural teachings and ways of knowing (Poonwassie & Charter, 2001). Use of traditional language by Indigenous youth is associated with positive health outcomes (e.g., reduced non-traditional use of tobacco, improved self-reported health and wellbeing, and lower rates of diabetes; Whalen et al., 2016). However, many linguistics estimates that 50% to 90% of the world's languages will decline by the end of the millennium (Whalen & Simmons, 2012; Whalen et al., 2016).

All Indigenous languages in Canada are endangered, and most are at risk of extinction (McIvor et al., 2009; Wilson, 2004). Through colonization, Indigenous languages have been lost, as the Canadian government imposed bans and inflicted punishments on many traditional practices, including speaking one's mother tongue at Indian Residential Schools (McIvor et al., 2009; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015a). The strength of Indigenous language being spoken in a community is an indicator of how well a group is maintaining in society (Hansen & Antsanen, 2016; Liebenberg, Ikeda, & Wood, 2015). As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples indicated, language is "the principal instrument by which culture is transmitted from one generation to another, by which members of a culture communicate meaning and make sense of their shared experience" (Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 602). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has also recognized the importance of language transmission to younger generations for emotional and spiritual purposes, and calls upon the Canadian government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act, which has a guiding principle that "the preservation, revitalization and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities" (TRC, 2015b p. 2). It is important for First Nation girls and youth to learn their language, as it is a link that connects people with their past, and grounds them socially, emotionally and spiritually (Norris, 2011).

YPR is a process by which decision-making and ownership are shared between the researcher and the youth community involved; creating a bidirectional relationship (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005), and adheres to the First Nation Principles of Ownership Control Access and Possession® (OCAP). OCAP® principles centre First Nation communities within the research process, whereby priorities are determined, controlled and disseminated by First Nation

peoples (FNIGC, 2014). This methodology positions the girls not as subjects of the process, but rather as equal partners to the adult allies in the research project. The thoughts and lived realities of the girls were to inform the Sturgeon Lake First Nation ACCESS Open Minds project about what is empowering, or about roadblocks in order to identify opportunities for change. Empowerment theory and transformative change are central to facilitating YPR research (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009).

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment research as a theoretical framework emerged from the discipline of community psychology to inform people about preventive mental health services (Moritsugu et al., 2013; Rappaport, 1990; Wallerstein, 1992; Zimmerman, 2000). The discipline of community psychology recognizes that knowledge is interpersonal, and focuses on empowering individuals who are the most marginalized, with the goal of having the greatest positive effect in the community (McDermott, 2008). Empowerment research is best suited using processes found in participatory research (Taylor et al., 2004; Shannon, 2013). Participatory research and empowerment theory have significant overlap in the areas of identifying topics and co-facilitating the process with the population who would realize the greatest benefit from the research, as well as the acquisition or development of skills (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Taylor et al., 2004; Nelson, Kloos, & Ornelas, 2014a; Shannon, 2013).

Empowerment theory provides principles, as well as a framework for organizing knowledge to assist in advancing the construct beyond political manipulation (Zimmerman, 2000). Characteristically, YPR and empowerment theory assume a value-based approach to research in which youth are encouraged to recognize their strengths and contributions to the project in order to enhance wellness within communities. Community well-being initiatives

involve the development of personal resources to cope with everyday challenges that promote

wellness through self-determination (Nelson et al., 2014a). Culturally-diverse communities must

exercise self-determination to individually and collectively implement culturally-responsive

services and supports that promote wellness and well-being (Janzen et al., 2010; Nelson et al.,

2014b). In addition, community-based research contributes to community empowerment by

supporting community goals of health, wellness and capacity-building, as well as increased

knowledge of health practices, benefits, and the provision of efficient health services by

producing evidence-informed research (Schnarch, 2004).

It has been recognized in the mental health literature that empowerment changes the

relationship between professionals and individuals (Nelson et al., 2014). Youth are not to be

passive recipients of programs and services that are created by decision-makers (Kirmayer,

Simpson, Cargo, 2003). However, health practitioners still function in a deficit system (e.g.,

disease-oriented and within a medical model - Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2011; Greenwood et al.,

2015; MacDonald et al., 2010). An empowerment approach to research redefines the

professional's (e.g., researcher and/or clinician) relationship with the participants. It becomes

one of collaborator or facilitator rather than a subject matter expert (Nelson et al., 2014;

Zimmerman, 2000). Health research in Canada is undergoing a paradigm shift, focusing on

patient-oriented research. The Canadian Institute of Health Research and the Canadian

Depression Research and Intervention Network are engaging people with lived experiences to

advise on transformational change in health research (Canadian Depression Research and

Intervention Network, 2015; Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2017). This paradigm shift

in health research creates evidence-informed practices through the engagement of those with

lived experience in assisting policy-makers to implement culturally-appropriate services.

Cultural adaptions are best-suited for participatory research approaches in mental health research. Participatory research grounds the research in the cultural and social realities of the community by ensuring relevancy, acceptability and feasibility, and by strengthening community stakeholders' capacity to support the implementation of mental health services (Cabassa & Baumann, 2013). Participatory research is a high-yielding field of research for identifying the core participatory principles and collaborative processes in facilitating the implementation of evidence-based mental health treatments (Cabassa & Baumann, 2013). However, little research has utilized participatory research to test the effectiveness of cultural adaptation approaches to implementing mental health interventions within the community, or to determine the effectiveness of the findings/outcomes (Cabassa & Baumann, 2013).

Relationality

Researchers who plan on conducting research with and within Indigenous communities or groups should engage in a relational research process; one that is built on the concept of relationality (Wilson, 2008). Wilson (2008) describes relationality as a necessity in the establishment of authentic and mutual connection of relationships; it is complex, and is the interconnected space where individuals come to understand their cultural capital. Relationality influences every decision and interaction within a research framework (Kovach, 2010), and is enacted through practicing the "four Rs" that Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) describe as respect, relevancy, reciprocity, and responsibility. From this understanding, all aspects of the project are to be understood in this research project from vantage points (in the case of this research: age and gender) that incorporate respect of accountability to relationships (e.g., relationships built with research participants, co-facilitators, community members, and the interconnectedness with

ideas and concepts). Accountability related to relationships is enacted through practicing the "four Rs" (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

Researchers' first commitment is to be able to listen to Indigenous partners and deconstruct barriers caused by colonialism with the goal of eliminating the stereotypes that may follow non-Indigenous researchers as a consequence of enforced oppressive ideologies over Indigenous peoples (Brown & Strega, 2005; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Smith, 1999). Further, researchers must engage in critical reflexive consciousness in order to understand how their social identity shapes the relationship (Freire, 1994). Critical reflexive consciousness is essential, as most research with Indigenous peoples in Canada has, and continues to be, studied through a Western colonial lens, overlooking Indigenous knowledge as well as its contributions to the research process (Absolon, 2011; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Castelleno, 2004; Kovach, 2010). Researchers do not simply choose participants; it is more of a reciprocal process of some existing relationship, connection and a measure of trustworthiness, therefore signifying a respectful approach to research (Kovach, 2010). Thus, the vantage points provided because of my age, gender, and youthfulness, helped in the facilitation and engagement in partnering with the girls in this project through relationship-building.

The Current Study: Utilizing Youth Participatory Research integrated with Transformative Action-oriented Methods, Empowerment Theory and Relationality to Co-develop the Research Project

YPR was chosen as the methodology in this thesis, as it lends itself to connect to the other theoretical approaches in the study (i.e., transformative action-oriented methods, empowerment and relationality). YPR employs an empowerment-oriented approach to research

to capitalize on internal and external strengths, supports, and resources of youth. This thesis builds upon these theories to recommend transformational change.

Transformational change in the context of the ACCESS Open Minds project entails a fundamental shift in the values and processes of individuals, as well as in systems (Nelson et al., 2014; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010); it requires a change in how research is conducted with Indigenous peoples (Ansloos, 2017; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2010). Research must be conducted in a positive way: no matter the outcome of the research, you must be able to rest at night because you know it was done the right way (Kovach, 2010). In order to implement effective behavioural change, prevention and intervention programs must be responsive to the cultural practices and worldviews of the population for whom the intervention is intended (Barrera et al., 2013). A worldview is a personal belief system connecting individuals with their identity and knowledge, which provides the basis of how we come to know who we are, where we are from, what we know about the world, and how we interact within the world. It is passed on from generation to generation through traditions, languages, relations, and culture (Absolon, 2010; Poonwassie & Charter, 2001; McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006; McCarty, Romero-Little, Warhol, & Zepeda, 2009; Whalen et al., 2016). Empowerment theory focuses on prevention of mental health through the phenomenological development of a certain state of mind (e.g., feeling powerful and competent, with high self-esteem; Van Vlaenderen, 2001), which is influenced by an individual's cultural beliefs (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Authentic empowerment is not an attribute that can be bestowed onto others. It is, however, an ongoing process by which individuals seek to fulfill their own needs (Haworth & Hart, 2007). Empowerment interventions require those who experience barriers to empowerment to participate in decision-making, and to have authority in making decisions (Haworth & Hart,

2007). The philosophical underpinnings and defining of empowerment interventions are rooted in the worldview of those whom they are designed to serve (Haworth & Hart, 2007; Zimmerman, 2000). Little research has explored how First Nation girls or youth broadly describe empowerment in relation to their lived experience of oppression (Shea, Poudrier, Chad, Atcheynum, 2011). Further, little has been done to explore empowerment from a First Nation cultural perspective.

The integration of cultural adaptation is important in this thesis, as cultural continuity is the foundation to positive health in First Nation communities, and leads to self-determination (Oster, Grier, Lightning, Mayan, & Toth, 2014). Developmental psychologists Chandler and Lalonde (1998), in their seminal research on First Nations youth suicide, described cultural continuity as the contemporary preservation of traditional culture through six original key factors: land claims, self-government, on-reserve education services, police and fire services, health services, and cultural facilities. In 2007, Hallett et al, updated cultural continuity factors to include Indigenous language as a marker of wellness. Language, as an indicator of cultural continuity, has proven to be predictive power over and above the original six markers of cultural continuity, meaning that First Nation communities with conversational knowledge of their own Indigenous language reported no youth suicides (Hallett et al., 2007). Kirmayer and colleagues (2007) described cultural continuity as "culture as something that is potentially enduring or continuously linked through processes of historical transformation with an identifiable past of tradition". Cultural continuity and positive transformation must come from within Indigenous communities in order to support youth in the contemporary setting, as cultural traditions are rediscovered and adapted to the social realities of each generation (Kirmayer et al., 2007).

As outlined in this section, YPR, empowerment theory and relationality were chosen because their interconnectedness positions this thesis to recommend transformational change from First Nation girls' experiences of empowerment, as well as their identified opportunities for change. These disciplines effectively weave together change within their community based on the girls lived experiences of empowerment, and their barriers to empowerment. YPR, empowerment theory and relationality seek to influence change through critical reflection, leading to social change through redefining the research roles to help strengthen or develop skills among the girls (e.g., authoritative voice, presentation and leadership skills). In Figure 4.1., the braid represents youth participatory processes (dark brown), empowerment theory (tan), and relationality (light brown), being woven together to represent the complementary nature of these methodological and theoretical constructs. The braid represents the strength of having support to recognize and achieve one's gifts and represents āhkamēyimowin. When intertwined, they guided the project to achieve āhkamēyimowin and ground the research project in the local context of Sturgeon Lake First Nation. Within the braid is the teachings of the Sturgeon Lake First Nation's Medicine Wheel that guided the research project to ensure that when looking at the co-creation of youth empowerment programs, they seek to achieve balance within the youth. Studying mamāhtāwicikew adds a spiritual component, allowing us to understand how this element influences health and well-being among youth.
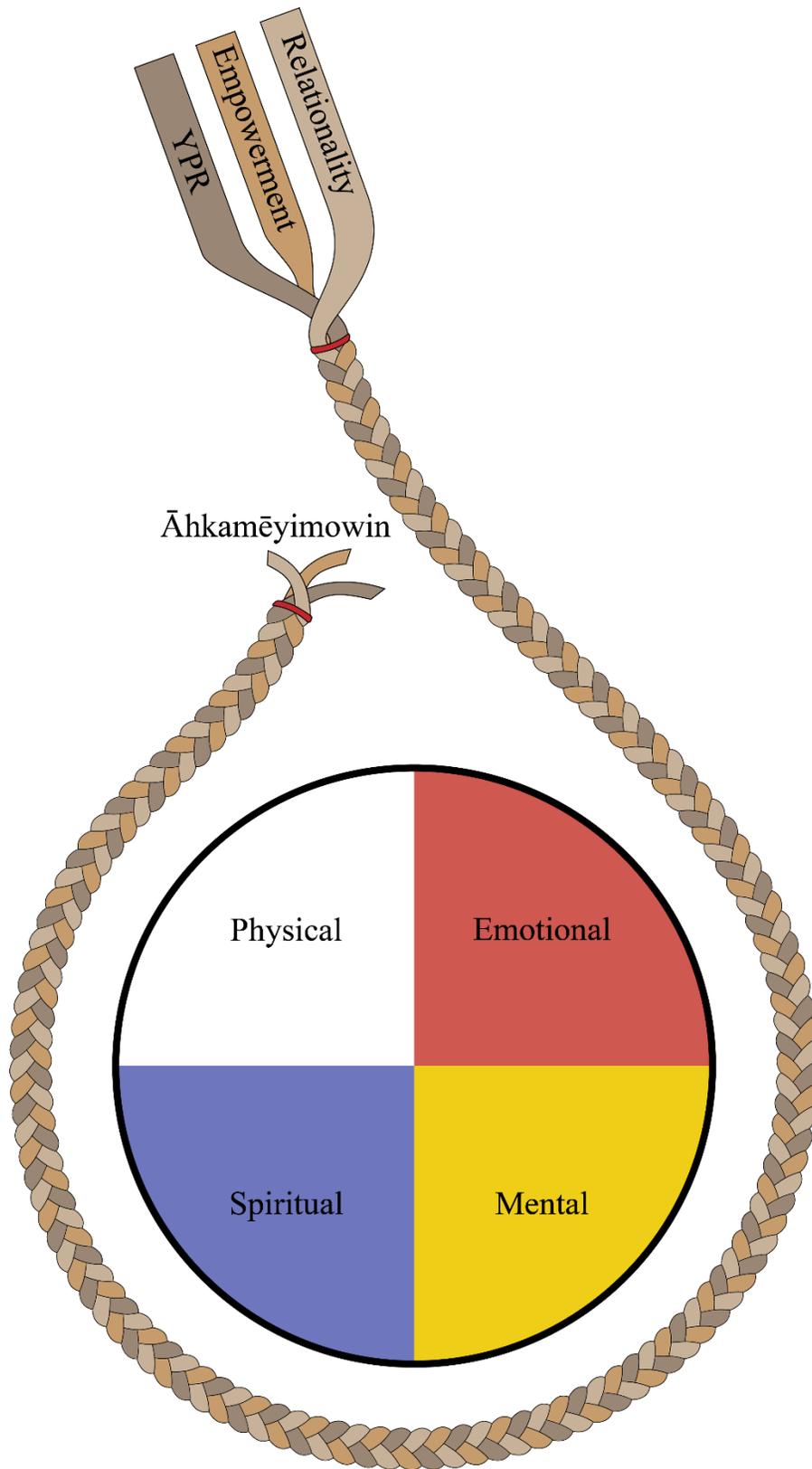
Figure 4.1. A community-based transformative research model.

Āhkamēyimowin

Āhkamēyimowin, as a guiding principle in the study, involved walking with the girls to help facilitate the research by creating a transformative learning environment. Transformative learning environments are focused on strengths that build capacity through established relationships (Martin, Chan, Torikka, Granger-Brown, & Ramsden, 2008). Facilitators of transformative learning environments demonstrate the following traits: the ability to listen, encourage and establish trust, incorporates sharing and reflection into the process of research to help recognize people's readiness to learn, learning about community and individual context and norms, and increasing the level of awareness and personal growth of all those involved in the process (Ramsden et al, 2003). Utilizing an empowering process through which the research was co-designed to be participatory, cooperative, engage the girls (particularly the Senior Mentor and myself), enable participants to contribute equally to the study through a co-learning process with the goal of influencing positive change within the community. The research was facilitated by walking with the girls to engage in mutual learning about their experiences, and explore ways to identify and implement positive change through the sharing of stories.

Creation of the Research Space and Research Relationships Through Authentic Engagement

Following Morton and Montgomery's (2011) four core processes; the research space was co-created with the girls of the Girl Power Program to ensure that the research involved the girls in decision making. I was an adult ally who supported and engaged in Girl Power activities outside of the research and the project would build on the strengths and perseverance of Indigenous girls. Ms. Kingfisher and Ms. Thornton helped to co-facilitate the research as constant adult supports and maintained the practices and philosophies (e.g., utilizing a talking

40

circle format, incorporating a rock as a talking piece) ensuring the format of the Girl Power sessions were also integrated into the research space. Ms. Sundown, a Senior Mentor, and myself had an existing relationship through other research projects being undertaken through ACCESS Open Minds, as well as, my community involvement in the Summer of 2016. This existing relationship helped to formulate early iterations of this project, as well as positioned Ms. Sundown to be a leader in the project and a peer role model for the girls. This followed the structure of the Girl Power Program and allowed Ms. Sundown to naturally emerge as a leader with the younger co-researchers. The participatory nature of the project and the roles of the girls was negotiated based on their abilities. It was decided by the adult allies and the girls to have Ms. Sundown play a greater role in the research and the analysis of the project. The girls participated in decision-making around time, food, activities, methods, and outcomes to ensure the project was fun, engaging and relevant.

Research Design

The research methods employed in this study were designed to be empowering and engaging for youth. In collaboration with the girls, arts-based methods were chosen for the creation of an 'Empowerment Blueprint'. In this research, it refers to any medium of art the girls' wished to create in order to express how they viewed empowerment, by using both English and Plains Cree descriptions of empowerment and mamāhtāwicikew. In another research activity for ACCESS Open Minds, I had observed that youth participated more openly and freely when they were able to write or express themselves through art. It allowed for a level of comfortability compared to focus groups. The youth-responses to why they preferred art was: because it allowed them to self-express and not feel judged; take the time to reflect on the question and not

worry about being called upon; they didn't perceive themselves as being different than their peers; and, it was fun.

Arts-based methods have been shown to be effective when working with Indigenous youth because they provide opportunities for creativity (Flicker et al., 2014; Lys et al., 2016; Yuen et al., 2013). Creativity develops as "a process that explores the relations of power through dialogue, creating spaces for transformation, and for new educational and methodological strategies" (Fox et al., 2004 as cited in Yuen et al., 2013, p.279). However, colonialism has affected the imaginations of youth (Yuen et al., 2013) as colonial institutions' in Canada regulated children's play, emotions and imaginations (Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, & Schmidt, 2011). Imaginative spaces are an important aspect of the creation of transformative learning spaces. It encourages Indigenous youth to transform and the emergence of multiple stories (Yuen et al., 2013). Imaginative spaces allow for creativity and promote self-expression (Yuen et al., 2013). Therefore, the methods used in this thesis were to provide an opportunity for the girls to imagine a different and empowered future.

Many researchers working with Indigenous youth are adapting arts-based methods to decolonize research (Flicker et al., 2014). Art can be viewed as medicine, as it helps healing through self-expression of one's self-identity and place (Trépanier, 2008). For Indigenous groups, art was a creative expression, religious practice, ritual model, maps of community, identity and lineage, and markers of governance structures and territorial heritage (Murihead & De Leeuw, 2012). Researchers using arts-based methods found it beneficial to offer participants an opportunity to participate equally in decision making, learning and sharing new skills, and build or reclaim their cultural identities and cultural practices (Adelson & Olding, 2012; Castleden & Garvin, 2008; Flicker et al., 2014; Iseke & Moore, 2011; Wexler, Eglinton, &

Gubrium, 2014; Willox, Harper, Edge, 'My Word'- Storytelling and Digital Media Lab, & Rigolet Inuit Community Government, 2013) .

Arts-based methods are an emerging approach in health sciences (Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, Allemang, & Stasiulis, 2012; Cox et al., 2010). This method is positioned to offer an alternative way of producing and communicating research data findings and "best-practices" in healthcare fields (Boydell et al., 2012; Keen & Todres, 2007). Further, behavioural observations were taken during the arts-based activities to identify any noticeable differences (e.g., level of engagement and participation throughout the project) in the girls' behaviours. Lastly, a reflection on the process of the research is provided by Ms. Sundown, Senior Mentor, who actively co-facilitated this research. The term "actively" is used to demonstrate the commitment and ability demonstrated by Ms. Sundown on the project to ensure it was relevant and exciting for the girls.

Participants

This study involved First Nation girls between the ages of 10 to 15 years who were attending school at the Sturgeon Lake Central School and who participated in the Girl Power Program. This research partnered with the school and the organizers (Ms. Thornton, Teachers Aid, and Ms. Kingfisher, Cree Teacher and Knowledge Keeper) of the Girl Power Program. Girls were invited to participate because of their involvement in this afterschool program. Overall, 18 girls participated out of the 22 who were enrolled in the Girl Power Program. The overall Girl Power Program consisted of three groups: girls (14), junior mentors (4) and senior mentors (4) – the numbers in brackets represent participants from each group.

Girls from each group participated in the study. Ms. Sundown helped facilitate the sessions, brainstorm ideas, provide input on how to engage the girls in the project, co-analyzed, and participated in knowledge translation. Although the other girls did participate in the shaping

of the research through identifying ice breakers, this research focuses specifically on the senior

mentor (Ms. Sundown's) reflection of the process for the previously-outlined reasons.

Although 18 girls participated in the research, 10 girls, aged 10 to 12 years, consistently

participated in all research sessions. Ms. Sundown was the only 15-year-old to participate for the

entire duration of the project. In the research activities that required group work, self-selection of

groups was encouraged because the girls had an established relationship with each other prior to

the research project, as they were often relatives or already best friends (as stated by the girls),

therefore creating an atmosphere conducive to collaboration. Two out of the ten girls self-

identified as being in the child welfare system and living with 'aunties', and two identified living

with a single mom.

Ethics

Historically, research conducted in Indigenous communities has not been a positive

experience for the community because research has predominately focused on Western

knowledge and has not included Indigenous knowledge (Absolon, 2011; Alfred, 2005;

Castelleno, 2004; Kovach, 2010). The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics

Board (REB) approved the larger Saskatchewan ACCESS Open Minds project in April 2016.

For this thesis, an Amendment under this Certificate of Approval from the Behavioural REB was

approved in February 2017. The girls in the project were engaged and discussed the purpose of

the Consent Forms, and parents were called to discuss the Forms by community delegates, as

appointed by the Sturgeon Lake First Nation Health Centre in February and March 2017. The

girls were sent home with the forms, and either their parents signed the consent form, or verbal

consent was obtained by community delegates. Consent included approval for the girls to be

audio and video recorded using the Social Science Research Laboratories (SSRL) Community-

based Observation Laboratory equipment. Some participants did not give consent to be recorded, therefore none of the sessions were recorded. In the creation of a video as decided by the group, only the girls who felt comfortable with the process and had parental consent participated.

Research Activity and Implementation

Transformative action-oriented methods were used throughout the research process to ensure the research was reflective of the girls' ability and readiness, based on their engagement and personal growth. It was important to stop, evaluate, reflect, and take corresponding action as necessary. There were a total of 11 sessions, which included four planning sessions and seven research activity days (i.e., data collection and data analysis, and knowledge translation activities). However, over the course of this work, I spent approximately 41 days (excluding the research activities for this project), building authentic relationships within the community. At the commencement of this research project, a meeting was held between myself, Mr. Clifford Ballantyne (ACCESS Open Minds Coordinator as the projects representative), Ms. Sandra Kingfisher, and Ms. Delphine Naytowhow (The Sturgeon Lake Central School Principal) to gain approval to work with the Girl Power Program, as well as to have a preliminary discussion on what the project would look like. Following the approval, a meeting with Ms. Kingfisher and Ms. Thornton was held to discuss content that would be of benefit and of interest to the girls. A separate conversation was had with Ms. Sundown, given that we had a pre-existing relationship. The project then began to unfold.

At the beginning of each meeting with the girls, food and beverages were provided and an ice-breaker, or yoga was facilitated to have the girls move around and leave their comfort zone. In order to make the girls feel comfortable in participating, it was important that the research sessions be structured in the same way as the sessions in the Girl Power Program; thus,

Ms. Sundown helped in framing the research sessions (e.g., sharing circle and ice-breaker activities). Prior to beginning the development of an 'Empowerment Blueprint', I met with the available girls (7), mostly the junior and senior mentors, on February 15, 2017 to discuss the research project and to provide the opportunity to have the girls help shape the project and outcomes. Although most of the girls were on a class swimming field trip, Ms. Thornton, Ms. Kingfisher, and the available girls wanted to meet to start brainstorming about the project. We sat in a circle, where each person introduced herself, allowing us the opportunity to learn more about each other. At this time, we also discussed an illustration of a First Nation female empowerment example, as highlighted in the introduction of this thesis: Shannen's Dream. This story helped the girls start thinking about empowerment, broadly, and the importance of using their voice individually and collectively. The importance of girls using their voice was emphasized, as females are powerful and need to be heard. We brainstormed how we would conclude the research project, and the idea of a spa day in the youth space was generated. Ms. Kingfisher discussed the importance of the project not only for the girls involved, but also for the younger girls to look up to them as role models. She continued to discuss the importance of acknowledging Mother Earth, and the role nature plays in healing. The seven girls in attendance were to inform the other girls about the project and obtain feedback. Before proceeding, cloth and tobacco were gifted to Ms. Norma Rabbitskin (Registered Nurse & Traditional Healer) and Ms. Kingfisher (Knowledge Keeper) who then shared traditional knowledge with us. Ms. Rabbitskin talked about the traditional role of women in the community and the rites of passage, and Ms. Kingfisher provided us with the Cree term *mamāhtāwicikew*.

Next, three brainstorming sessions occurred on what it means to be a girl, and how this relates to empowerment. At these meetings, the girls worked in three groups: two groups of six,

and one group of five. In each group, one girl volunteered to have the outline of her body traced, and the groups were allotted 20 minutes to brainstorm words that represent being a girl. Ms. Kingfisher, Ms. Thornton and I each facilitated a group and supported the girls with brainstorming because we wanted it to be reflective of their perception of being a girl. We then reconvened in a circle, and the girls presented their top five words, explaining why they choose those words. They also identified common themes across the outlines (See Figure 5.2. to Figure 5.5. in Chapter Five).

Following this, we had four sessions where we worked with the girls to create an 'Empowerment Blueprint' from their lived experience. We also revisited the previous brainstorming activities, specifically of the girls' descriptions of what it means to be a girl. This information was used to begin our analysis of girl empowerment, and roadblocks to empowerment. The girls were then provided with the list of roadblocks that they identified to develop solutions to overcome them. They drew a road to represent 'Sturgeon Lake Road', and drew horizontal lines across the road to act as roadblocks. We imagined that we were in a car driving along the road, and that we would have to stop for these roadblocks, at which point the girls brainstormed solutions to overcome the challenges. The girls' 'roads' were posted on the wall to identify any other roadblocks, the top three roadblocks, and ways to overcome them through art and written responses (See Figure 5.7. in Chapter Five).

Data Analysis

Participatory analysis through transformative action-oriented methods was chosen to analyze the data, as it brings out the views and experiences of the girls (e.g., their reality, their challenges, and their understandings of problems and solutions), allowing for constant feedback/iterations by the girls. Participatory analysis encouraged the girls (primarily Ms.

Sundown) to influence the process of the research project, the writing of the findings, and the community and conference presentations. It was important to ensure that this research was credible from the perspectives of the girls, and for them to feel that it was a true representation of their experiences. Participant observation notes were taken by myself on the girls' behaviour during the meetings to detect any notable differences in body language, which was important because it helped determined the girls' levels of comfort and confidence.

Data was preliminarily analyzed by Ms. Sundown and myself before each meeting, and presented back to the girls to allow for optimal feedback. Data was often compiled onto flip chart paper, or presented in the same format in which it was collected (e.g., in a body outline), with major themes identified. Ms. Sundown and I would meet before or after the session to discuss any emerging themes that we observed in the data. We would start each session with a review of the previous sessions, and would constantly add the girls' feedback, building until the end of the project. For example, at the start of each session we would place all the flip chart notes and outlines of the girls around the room so that the girls could refer to them as we moved through the project. They were encouraged at any point to add or change their descriptions of what it meant to be a girl, their perception of empowerment, or roadblocks and solutions. The data was always available for the girls to view during the research sessions, and was available upon request. It was an iterative process until the girls were satisfied and ready to move onto the next phase.

In order to ensure that the research was engaging and relevant, when Ms. Sundown and I met before or after the session to discuss how to improve the next session, we would reflect on what the girls enjoyed. After each session, the girls who participated were asked if they enjoyed the session, if it was fun, and what they wanted next week. The girls were also asked when we

would be able to meet again based on their school work and extra circular activities. Ms. Sundown and I tried to accommodate as many of the girls' schedules as possible. We would make notes and incorporate their requests in the next or upcoming meetings. For example, the girls particularly enjoyed the snowball ice-breaker, where everyone stands in a circle, writes their name on a piece of paper, crumples it up, and tosses it into the middle. At the count of three, everyone runs into the middle and picks a snowball, reads the name out loud, and provides a compliment to that girl. If you receive your name, you would trade with someone. This activity was originally selected by Ms. Sundown to help the girls begin to feel comfortable giving and receiving compliments, a concern that was identified in an earlier session. This ice-breaker was used on two occasions at the request of the girls. They also requested yoga, as that is how Ms. Thornton started their sessions in the Girl Power Program. Further, the activity of tracing girls' bodies came out of a discussion with Ms. Sundown on how to engage girls in a fun way for the research. Ms. Sundown and I often focused on strategizing how to get the Senior Mentors to be involved in the project, and how to make it engaging and interesting for them.

Knowledge Translation

The girls participated in knowledge translation throughout the research project. Once all the data was analyzed, it was decided by the girls that they would to create a short video on their collective description of empowerment. The girls worked with a young woman (Jasmine Sousa) who was studying film at the University of Calgary at the time, in order to complete the video. Jasmine also spent time teaching the girls about videography and how to create a short film. The video has been shown at two conferences (Department of Psychiatry Student Research Day, 12th Bi-annual International Expressive Arts Therapy Conference).

It is important to note that Ms. Sundown has co-presented at four conferences (Saskatchewan Centre of Patient Oriented Research Share the Vision: A Day to Learn and Connect, Department of Psychiatry Annual Student Seminar Day, 12th Bi-annual International Expressive Arts Therapy Conference, The People Around the World Conference - 2018). Through watching Ms. Sundown's presentation at the Department of Psychiatry Annual Student Seminar Day, her little sister Miss Kara Prosper, a participant in the project, asked if she could co-present at the next conference. Ms. Sundown, Miss Prosper, and another senior mentor co-presented an arts-based workshop at the 12th Bi-annual International Expressive Arts Therapy Conference in Winnipeg. In the development of all conference materials, everyone (Ms. Kingfisher, Ms. Thornton, and the girls) were invited to provide input into the presentation, poster, or workshop material that would be used in the presentation.

Chapter Five: Findings

In this chapter, the research findings are presented based upon the lived experiences of empowerment, and roadblocks to empowerment, of the girls in the Girl Power Program. This chapter was written in collaboration with the young female participants, Ms. Kingfisher, and Ms. Thornton, the adult mentors of the group. Ms. Kingfisher emphasized not to be fixated on the terminology of empowerment versus mamāhtāwicikew; to use the terms the girls used. It is important to note that the first language of the girls who participated in the project was English, however they know common words in Cree (e.g., astum (come here), petakwey (come on it), awus (go away), tapwe (yes) and namotts (no)). The data is presented as a narrative, weaving together key themes of activities that facilitate empowerment (e.g., sports) and road blocks that impede empowerment (e.g., hunger) as discussed by the girls. A group narrative was provided based upon how the girls defined empowerment; this is valued by the community university research team in this project, as it tells a story that was created by a group of people through multiple forms of interaction (e.g., group discussion, textual analysis, and creative expression; Rappaport, 1995).

Data analysis was undertaken using an YPR method that allowed the girls' voices to emerge. The girls were continually encouraged to represent their experiences from their viewpoints because they were the experts on their lived experience. It was important for the girls to be active in the knowledge production, as knowledge is the foundation for action and strategizing change within the community of Sturgeon Lake First Nation. YPR understands that research itself is not the endpoint (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Scott et al., 2015). Rather, YPR supports participants to realize their personal awareness to act as change agents from their own

perspective, which in turn feeds transformational change (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Scott et al., 2015).

What is Mamāhtāwicikew?

Ms. Kingfisher provided the group with the words mamāhtāwicikew (empowerment) and *iskwēsis* (girls). In the Cree language, mamāhtāwicikew refers to the healing of the spirit or a spiritual journey where self-discipline is learned through rites of passage ceremonies. In the case of First Nation girls, this usually begins before or shortly after their first menstrual cycle, known as their 'moon time'. Mamāhtāwicikew is a positive energy within our souls; mamāhtāwicikew is the recognition of individuals finding their path in life through the discovery of their gifts from the Creator. It acknowledges that people walk their own path, and that there are times when individuals will stray from their path because nobody is perfect. This allows opportunities for growth and learning; influenced by the individuals' personality and attitudes. Mamāhtāwicikew is allowing people to be assertive and to actively use their voice to find themselves through self-respect and self-love, which will enable them to arouse and acknowledge their feelings to invest within themselves. We do not empower others; we support others: When you have the inner self-strength, people will gravitate towards you because of your positive energy.

Ms. Kingfisher used the analogy of a hot air balloon to represent mamāhtāwicikew (See Figure 5.1.). It was important for the research project for the explanation of mamāhtāwicikew to be simple and at a level the girls would understand. Ms. Kingfisher ensured the sessions were relevant, and closed the sessions when she felt the girls absorbed all they could in that session. The analogy of the hot air balloon represented the journey of mamāhtāwicikew. The flying of the hot air balloon was to describe a girl's life, and that a girl is in control of her destiny. The hot air balloon demonstrated that when you fill your life with positive energies, it 'generates heat'

within the person's heart (representing the balloon) where your spirit lives. In Plains Cree, this would be explained through *sohkētamowin*, having a strong mind and heart. As individuals inflated their balloon with positive things (e.g., love, respect, honesty, happiness, and humility), they were told that they can achieve anything they want because they are in-control of their future. Only the girls can be in control of their lives: their family can support them, but it is up to them to be the person they want to be. It was important for the girls to practice self-care through good hygiene (e.g., clean room, brush teeth, shower, and to wear clean clothes) to look the BEST they can for themselves. When Ms. Kingfisher spoke about confidence-building through self-care (describing it as brushing their hair so it is not messy, wearing clean clothes, and not covering their mouth when talking), six of the girls sat up straight, fixed their hair, and placed their hands on their lap instead of covering their face. The teaching encouraged the girls to practice self-care of their spirits through honesty, respectfulness, forgiveness, and humility. Mamāhtāwicikew is not stable - it is dynamic and ever- changing. Over the course of a girl's life, mamāhtāwicikew will be a cyclical process of growth and discovery based on the stage of life the girl is in, and what her lived experience is.

Figure 5.1. represents a hot air balloon in flight. The words in the balloon are examples of, but not limited to, the positive values that allow one to live a good life to achieve mamāhtāwicikew. The words jealousy and anger are represented as negative traits that can hold a girl back from achieving empowerment.
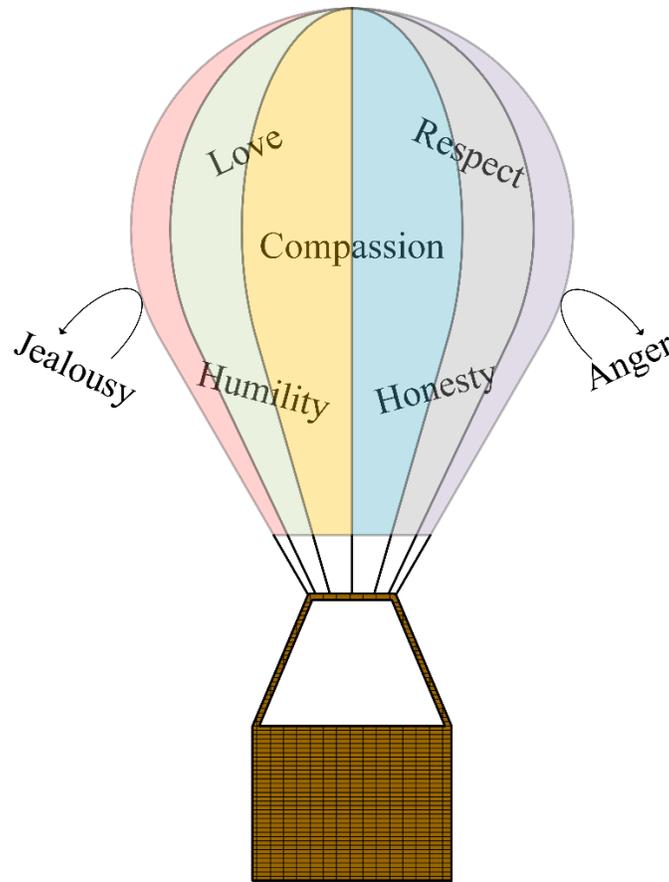
Figure 5.1. Hot Air Balloon Analogy of Mamāhtāwicikew. This figure demonstrates that when girls fill themselves with positive values, they will fly their hot air balloon and negative morals will not enter.

What does it mean to be a girl?

Before the development of the 'Empowerment Blueprint', the girls brainstormed about "what it means to be a girl?". It was determined prior to the session with Ms. Sundown that in order to engage the girls, we had to incorporate an activity that would be fun; it was decided that the activity would be to outline a girl's body, and to have them work in groups to describe what it means to be a girl. It was collectively agreed by the Girl Power Program, including the adult mentors, that tracing the girls' bodies in pairs would be entertaining and engaging. Figure 5.2. to Figure 5.4. illustrate the girls' art work and their collective description of what it means to be a girl. Figure 5.5. outlines the participatory data analysis (words in blue were in all three groups,

and words in red were in any two groups). The circled words in the traced diagram of the girl's outline are the top words determined by the group for 'girl empowerment', while the writing placed on the outside of the diagram specify why girls choose those words. The girls choose the following words: smart, strong, powerful, brave and courageous. Smart was chosen because education is important for future generations, and to be able to help individuals heal. Girls are strong because they can cope with the struggle of losing family members or friends, but also because they can lift elephants. The girls said, "they can lift elephants" to be silly, but this implies they are strong enough to lift an animal that weighs approximately two tons. Further, the girls consistently talked about perseverance and strength despite circumstances; no matter what happened or happens in their life they are strong (as implied by lifting an elephant) and will persevere. The girls linked bravery and courageous together, describing it as not being scared because girls can do anything. The girls added the word hope because girls are hopeful for their future, as they can become anything because they are smart. However, one girl brought up how a girl who is too smart is a bad thing because she was bullied.

Figure 5.2. Group 1 description of what it means to be a girl.

Figure 5.3. Group 2 description of what it means to be a girl.

Figure 5.4. Group 3 description of what it means to be a girl.
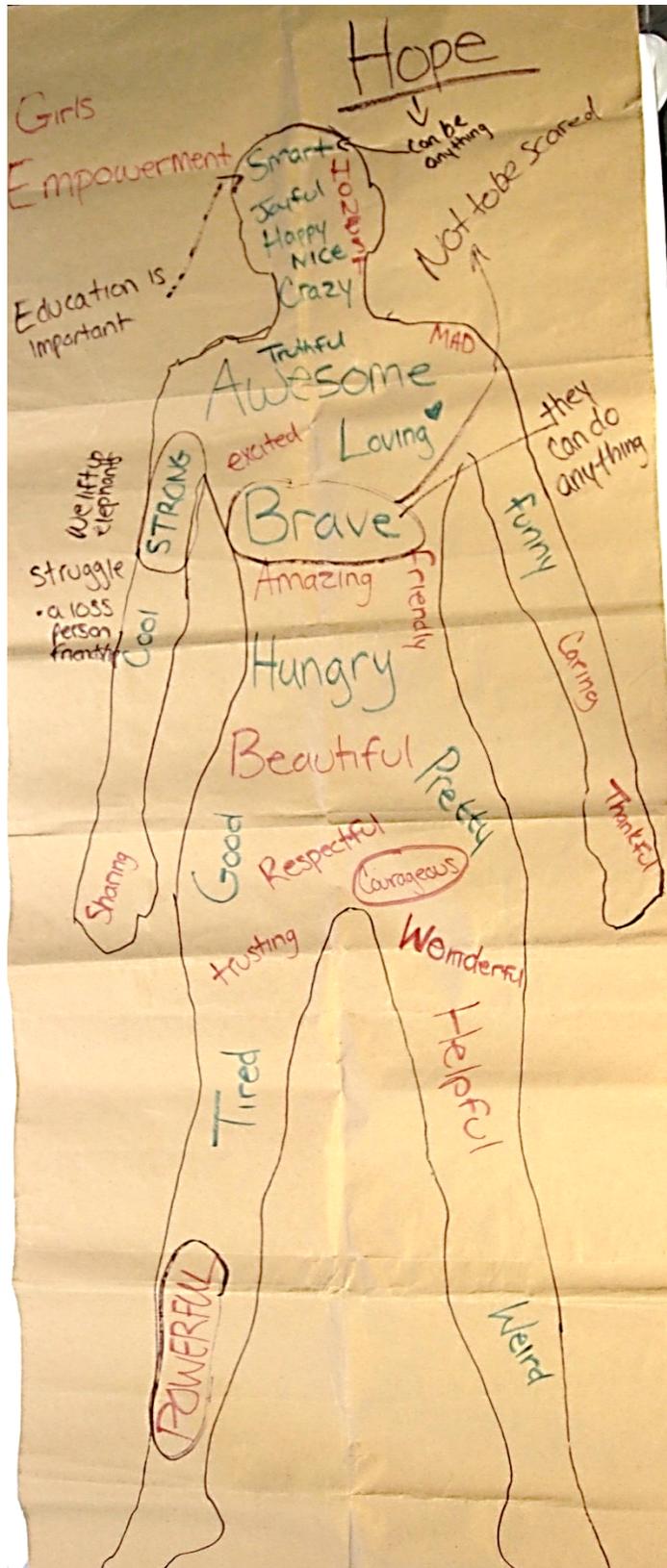
Figure 5.5. Participatory data analysis of the collective descriptions of what it means to be a girl.

Figure 5.6. What does it mean to be a girl? This figure represents how the girls collectively describe being a girl.

Figure 5.6. demonstrates how the girls collectively describe what it means to be a girl. The top three words identified by the group as being best to describe being a girl at Sturgeon Lake First Nation were: brave, courageous, and powerful. One girl wrote: "girls are brave for doing anything and never ever giving up. For example, my Mom is brave for doing something courageous like raising me for 12 years and not giving up on doing anything". Another girl wrote: "to not stay up all night so they can go to the school". Further, one participant wrote: "us girls/women from Sturgeon Lake, are all these things, because we see things and we still stand strong, as long as we have someone by our side"; "because we have support"; and "coming to school is being brave". These quotes were chosen with permission from the girls, and because they represented the most comprehensive words of what the girls articulated. Other common themes included not being afraid of animals (i.e., bears and wolves), and Grandmas and Aunties beating cancer.

Roadblocks to Empowerment

The girls talked about experiences of barriers to empowerment more frequently than experiences of empowerment. The girls identified roadblocks to empowerment as being hungry, bullied, abused, exposed to drug and alcohol abuse, motor vehicle accidents, experiencing violence, being too smart, and lacking support. The top three roadblocks to empowerment are shown in Figure 5.7. in the order of how the girls ranked them as barriers. One girl identified programs in the community that help empower girls, which are demonstrated by blue arrows in Figure 5.7. The girls identified hunger as an obstacle of hope for the future as they are more concerned with when and what they are going to eat. The girls discussed how to overcome these obstacles by using strong powerful voices, to stand up for themselves, to ask why people are angry and fighting, or swearing, to tell people to stop negative behaviors (e.g., drugs and alcohol and swearing), to understand why someone is in pain, to never be mean, and to avoid doing drugs and alcohol. Further, they described participating in cultural activities (e.g., Strawberry Fast, Moon Time Ceremonies, and Pow-wow Dancing and Round Dance), practicing self-care (e.g., reading), that family and God are there for support, and to be loving and kind to everyone. It was apparent that the girls were describing strategies to overcome obstacles to empowerment through compassion and empathy to try and understand why someone is behaving the way they are. It was also evident that the girls also addressed obstacles through a fusion of Indigenous and Western ideologies of mamāhtāwicikew and empowerment through feeling inspired and capable of using their strong powerful voices individually and collectively to stand up for themselves. They also described wanting to participate in cultural ceremonies, and to learn about being an Indigenous girl in transition to womanhood through sacred ceremonies. It was discussed by Ms. Kingfisher and Ms. Thornton how negative things happen in our lives that create roadblocks that

wound our spirit, but as girls and as a community, obstacles can be overcome. Negativity from others is not for the girls to hold on to and therefore, it is important to practice self-care; to rid themselves of the negative experiences. One girl, when brainstorming how to overcome the roadblocks, said "to go around them and take the long way", as she felt it was easier than tackling the roadblock. This particular girl was shy and kept to herself throughout the research project; however, her peers said she was empowered, but they were too shy to tell her. They said she was 'empowerment' because she was a great friend and could always be counted on. The girls were afraid to complement each other, but over the course of the research it was actively encouraged by the adult facilitators, who led by example.
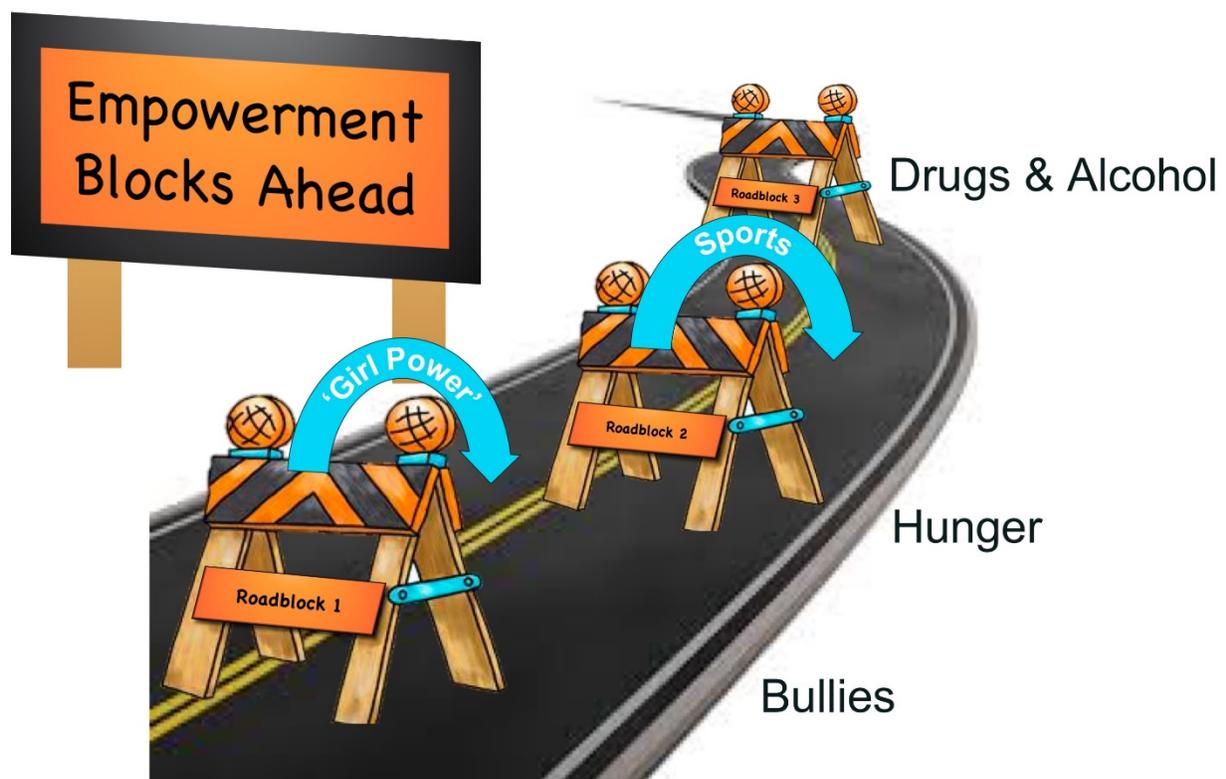
Figure 5.7. Roadblocks to Empowerment. This figure shows the top 3 roadblocks to empowerment at Sturgeon Lake First Nation and the programs that support girl empowerment in the blue arrows as identified by the girls.

What is Empowering at Sturgeon LakeFirst Nation?

The girls collectively described the Girl Power Program and the sporting activities in the villages (ACCESS Open Minds) as empowering. These are two youth empowerment programs in the community that actively engage youth participants to overcome the residual factors of colonialism. When asked why these were empowering, the girls explained that Ms. Thornton protects them from bullies and has snacks in her room, and that sports helps them be themselves. They described sports as fun, and it was something to do. Having a pet was also a common theme. The girls described pets as being supporters and important to them. When asked individually to describe their experiences, one girl described being empowered as: "getting good marks and having my Mom tell me that she was very proud of me; when my family loves the food, I make; when my teacher told me that my essay was very good, that made me feel empowered because I had worked so hard, that paid off, because I also got a good mark for that." Other girls said: "I helped my dog when it almost died on my family and friends because it had cancer for a long time; well some T.V. shows are empowering and make you feel better about your own lives and family members or people you trust; I finally saw my Dad after three years; I was so happy then I went to this camp and made new friends and I felt so happy; I feel pretty a lot because I feel powerful a lot because it makes me feel happy and nice and I love my family". One girl said that social media was empowering because "there are communities of people who like the same things as you and that can be empowering, knowing that there are people like that or people who are trying to help you in your problems and trying to spread awareness of diseases and more problems."

The Development of the Empowerment Blueprint

Through the development of an 'Empowerment Blueprint' (Figure 5.8. to Figure 5.10.), the girls collectively described mamāhtāwicikew as: *bravery, because we are strong and not afraid of bullies or seeing the world; we protect ourselves and our family; courageous, to stand up to bad people and walk away from them; to say no to drugs and alcohol; smart, we could do so much that we do not even know about, we can do anything we want, doctors, lawyers, nurses and teachers; she knows what she wants; feelings a girl has or how she sees herself; not being shy, putting yourself out there; caring for each other with love; having a powerful voice and using it; standing up to bullies and for herself; doing what you love, playing sports and being artistic; happy, girls want to be happy all the time; being beautiful; without all these things we wouldn't be ourselves.* Only three 'Empowerment Blueprints' are shown (Figure 5.8. to Figure 5.10.) as the other blueprints were damaged during the drying process. The blueprints illustrated how the girls felt empowered, and what helped facilitate empowerment in their lives.
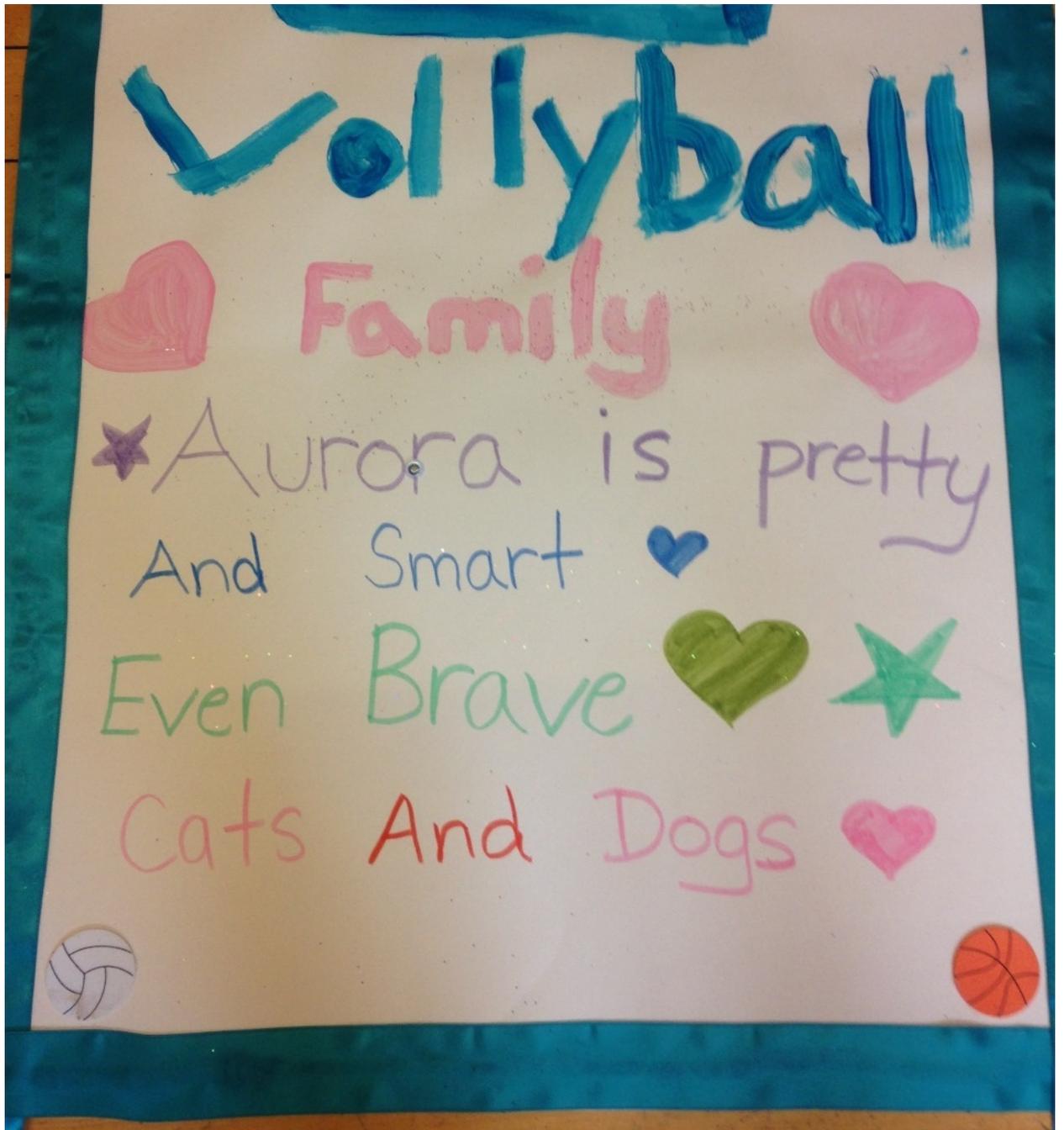
Figure 5.8. Participant 'Empowerment Blueprint'.
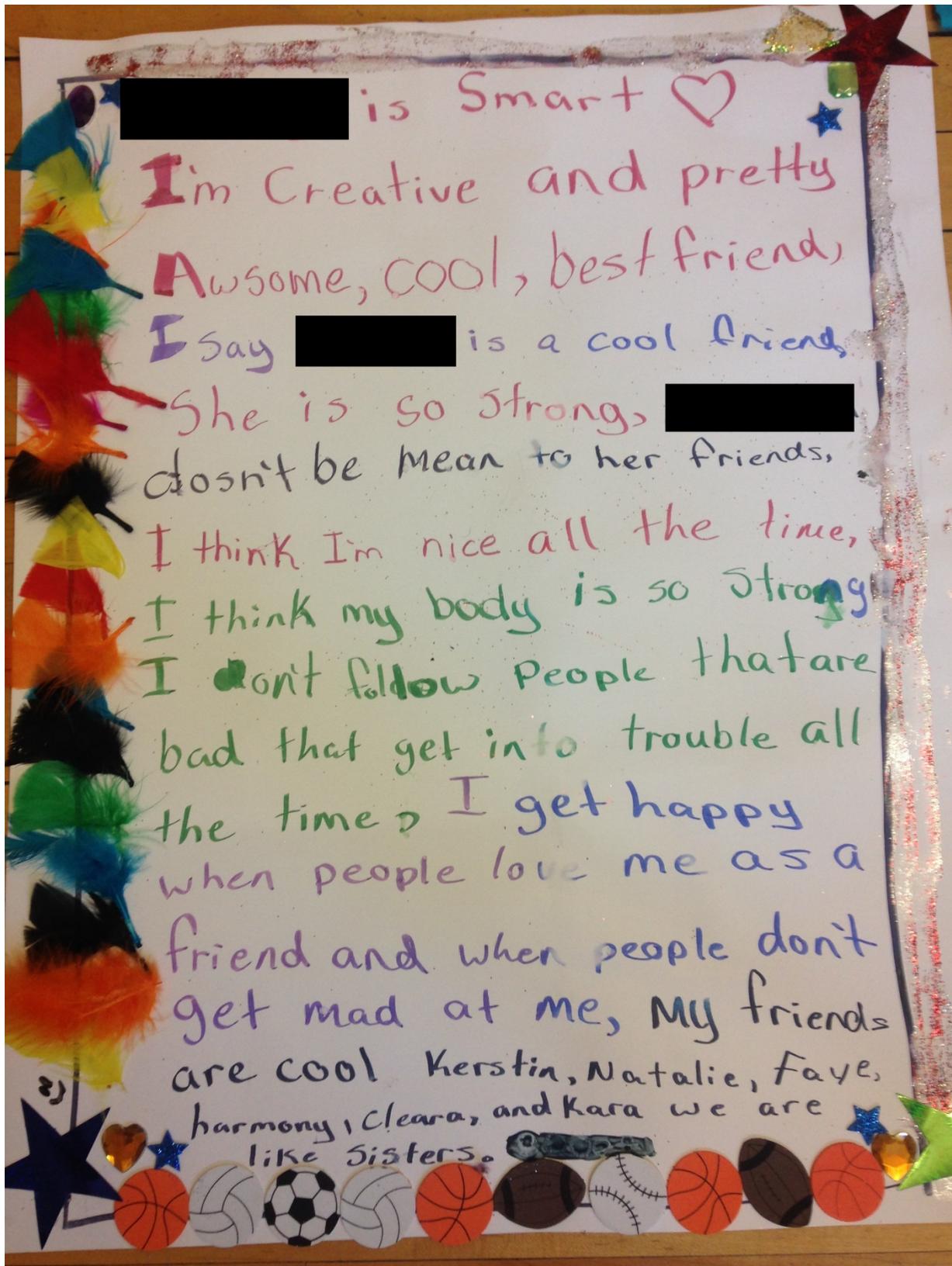
Figure 5.9. Participant 'Empowerment Blueprint'.
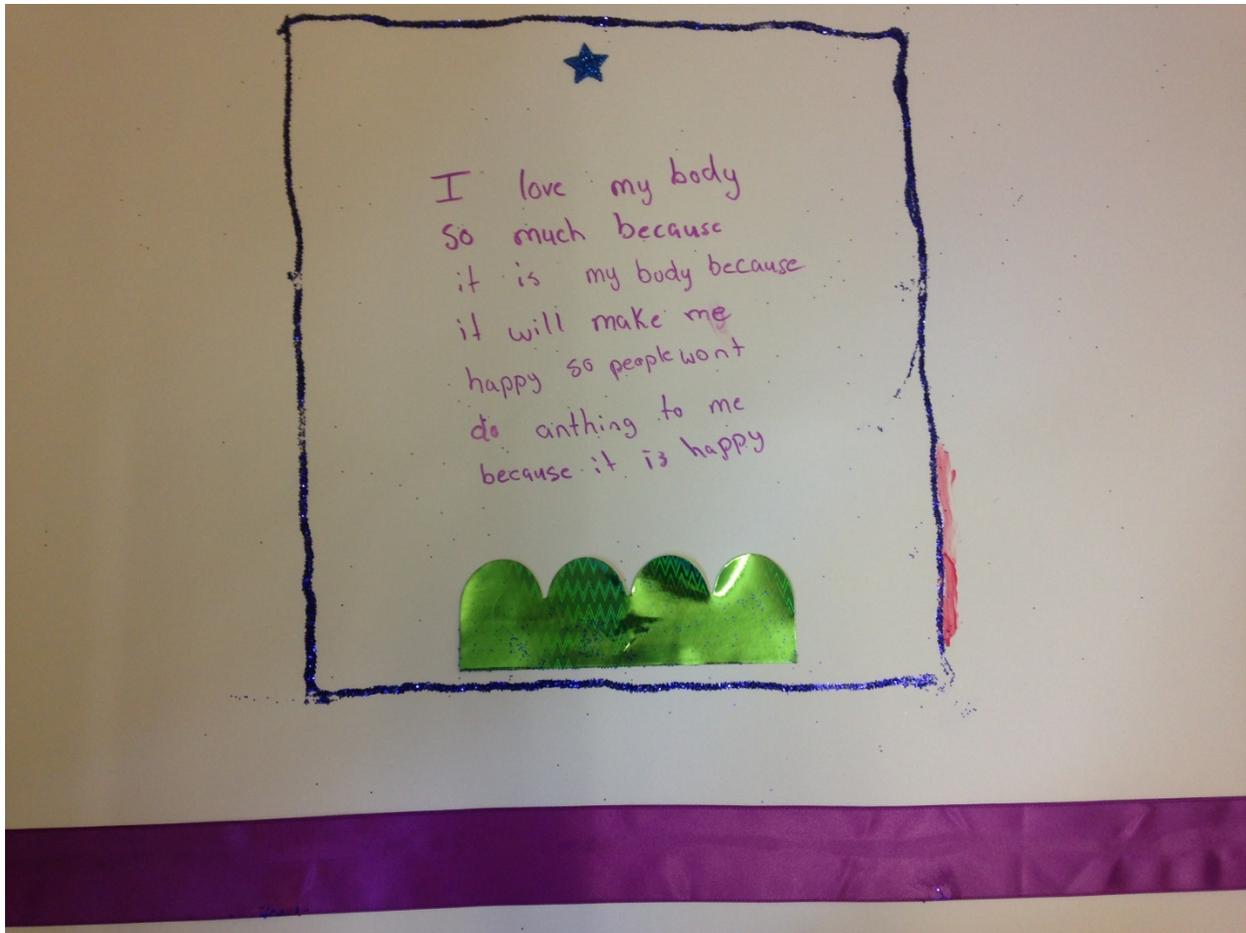
Figure 5.10. Participant 'Empowerment Blueprint'.

Behavioural Observations

At the start of the project, most girls were shy and would hide their faces when talking. The girls were shy partially because of not being familiar with me. During one focus group when Ms. Thornton and Ms. Kingfisher were not present, the girls became extremely talkative and wanted to learn more about me (e.g., what do you do? do you have a boyfriend? and does he love you?). This demonstrated that my age may have acted as a balancing factor and helped facilitate authentic relationships with the girls. The girls who participated in the sporting activities in the village during the summer talked about how much fun the activities were, and asked if I would do the activities again. As the girls became more comfortable with me, our

relationships were established, and the more engaging the research became. Throughout the project, the girls began to appear more confident, sitting upright and not covering their faces when speaking, and participating more when a Sharing Circle was conducted. During the filming of the short video clip, the girls were shy to participate at first, but quickly became comfortable with the project when they could use the camera to film each other. When showing the final video to the girls, they all sat giggling throughout the video. They were all extremely excited to hear that we won first place at the Life and Health Science Research Exposition 2017 in the Community Health-Behaviour category for our poster presentation, and even screamed Yes! with excitement that we won.

Ms. Thornton observed that girls commonly stop participating in the Girl Power Program because of involvement in the child welfare system, and when the senior mentors became more interested in dating than being part of the Girl Power Program. Ms Thornton noticed that the fact that when girls prioritized being in a relationship, it influenced how they spent their time after school, and they could be seen with their new partners. Relationships are important for both boys and girls in the community, and many teachers noted that "If you want the boys to succeed in school, find them a partner".

Ms. Sundown's sister Miss Prosper, who participated in the project, came to support Ms. Sundown who co-presented the methodology of this project at the Department of Psychiatry Student Research Day and asked if she too could present on the project. This was something she was not interested in when the girls were invited to join Ms. Sundown's presentation, as she was shy. However, through Ms. Sundown's natural ability to be a mentor and leader, it was observed that not only her sister, but also the girls in the Girl Power Program, were interested in

developing and strengthening their presentation skills through observing Ms. Sundown's confidence in her presentations.

It was informally observed that girls whose family members or mothers participated in cultural ceremonies appeared to be more confident, and had a stronger sense of cultural identity. These girls discussed how their mothers participated in ceremonies such as the Strawberry Fast and Moon Time ceremonies with them.

Youth Reflection

It was important for Ms. Sundown to reflect on her experience in the project:

Working with a young adult has been fun and interesting. When working with Carolyn, I built a bond with her. She knew what to do and say when it came to talking about subjects and things that she needed to know. She made research fun, which I thought was going to be boring. She also understood what my knowledge could take and how much information I could handle. She made me think outside the box. I didn't feel strange nor did it feel awkward when we would talk. The outcomes of working with her were that when you do research and work together, both of us learned things, and our knowledge was on the same page. Working with her has been the best, and I couldn't have asked for another person to do it with.

Further, Ms. Sundown co-presented at the Saskatchewan Centre of Patient Oriented Research (SCPOR): Share the Vision: A Day to Learn and Connect (Figure 5.11.), and was able to share her experiences with the girls. A copy of the Poster is displayed in the Sturgeon Lake Central School library for all students to view, and the girls were extremely happy to see the printed version of the poster. Ms. Sundown has expressed how proud she is about her involvement in the project, and was able to answer questions positively on her role within the project. She also co-

presented to the Department of Psychiatry Student Research Day (Figure 5.12.), the 12th Bi-

annual International Expressive Arts Therapy Conference in Winnipeg, and the People Around

the World Conference (Figure 5.13.). This activity was intended to help strengthen her

presentation skills, one of her identified goals. She discussed the importance of culture to

Sturgeon Lake youth, and the process of the research in her presentations.
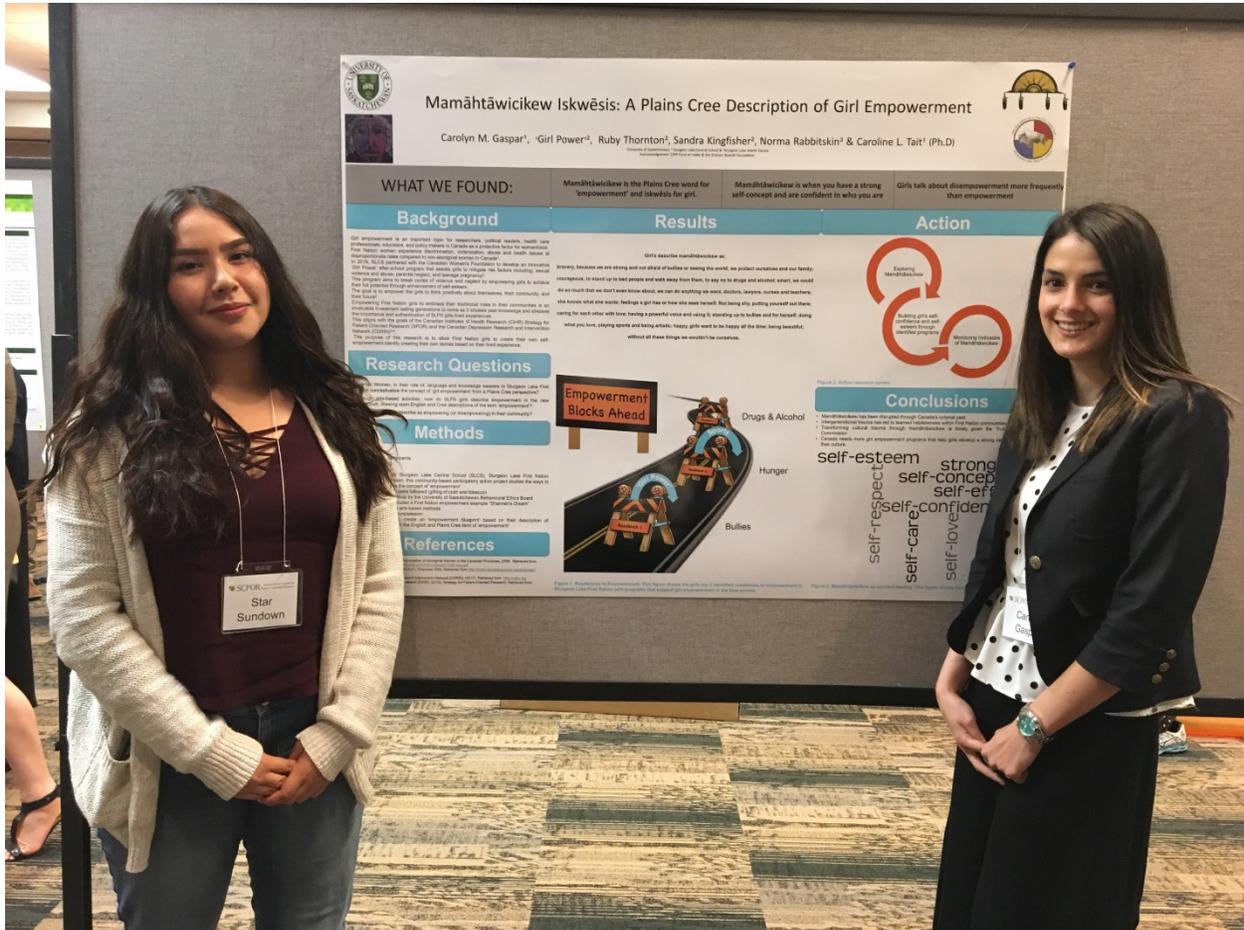
Figure 5.11. Presenting at the Saskatchewan Centre of Patient Oriented Research (SCPOR): Share the Vision: A Day to Learn and Connect. This was the winning poster for the Life and Health Science Research Exposition 2017. Pictured left to right: Star Sundown and Carolyn Gaspar.

Figure 5.12. Presenting at the University of Saskatchewan Department of Psychiatry Student Research Day. Pictured left to right: Star Sundown and Carolyn Gaspar.

Figure 5.13. Presenting at the People Around the World Conference at the University of Saskatchewan. Pictured left to right: Sandra Kingfisher, Star Sundown, Carolyn Gaspar, and Ruby Thornton.

Chapter Six: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the term mamāhtāwicikew and illuminate how girls living at Sturgeon Lake First Nation and enrolled in the Girl Power Program at the Sturgeon Lake Central School described experiences of empowerment, and roadblocks to empowerment, through āhkamēyimowin. With the coming-of-age, girls receiving their moon time is not only a transition from girlhood to womanhood in their culture, but is pivotal and empowering, as well as potentially vulnerable phase of the lifespan (Anderson, 2011; Markstrom, 2008; Mihesuah, 2003). The transition from girlhood to womanhood is a powerful time, as girls receive their gift of life-bearing at menarche and become empowered (Anderson, 2011; Markstrom, 2008; Mihesuah, 2003). Due to an empowered state during menstruation, girls and women are believed to influence the welfare of others and themselves. Girls need to receive their rites of passage to ensure a successful transition into adulthood, as this affects the life course (Anderson, 2011; Markstrom, 2008; Mihesuah, 2003). At Sturgeon Lake First Nation, the rites of passage for girls at menarche is the Strawberry Fast. Two girls in the Girl Power Program self-identified as having participated in this ceremony, and described it as a protective factor for empowerment because it allowed them to learn about the transition to womanhood, and how powerful women are.

During puberty, girls are in a wandering stage, trying to self-discover who they are. Āhkamēyimowin is an important construct for girls to understand, particularly during this transition in their lives as it facilitates empowerment. Āhkamēyimowin is having someone walk beside you and support you despite adversities. Therefore, it is central for girls to have strong women mentors at puberty to guide them, and provide cultural teachings such as behavioural restrictions while they are on their Moon Time. For example, but not limited to: cannot step over anyone, should not attend ceremonies, especially where pipes, feathers, and medicines are

involved, should not be in the circle, and should not handle medicines (as it makes them lose their ability to heal) as a woman on her moon time is powerful (J. Charles, personal communication, October 5th, 2017). Moon time is a woman's sacred ceremony, when she is to keep to herself, and refrain from touching anyone's belongings except her own (J. Charles, personal communication, October 5th, 2017). It is also important for the girls to have a positive support to walk with and provide guidance, as they explore and try new things while building capacity to lead future generations in change. Building capacity for empowerment includes being able to see the gifts each individual is provided by the Creator.

Exploring Mamāhtāwicikew

This study is the first to explore the term mamāhtāwicikew in relation to existing empowerment literature. When both empowerment (in the field of community psychology) and mamāhtāwicikew are considered side by side, there is a noticeable difference in positions of authority (See Table 6.1.). Mamāhtāwicikew is centered on the individual's gift provided by the Creator to be shared with all their relatives. Empowerment (in a Euro-western centric view) is commonly focused on 'taking charge of one's life, or that power is given to'. In contrast, mamāhtāwicikew is more egalitarian and focused on community, collaboration and connection, whereas empowerment in community psychology is more authoritarian primarily focusing on economic and political power (Moritsugu et al., 2013). However, the terms have similar processes (See Table 6.1.). Mamāhtāwicikew involves mastering one's gifts, which are shared over the course of one's life. Our actions affect how and when our gifts will be discovered, and are understood through a relational process. For example, if a girl has a wounded spirit because of the intergenerational effects of colonialism in Canada, it will take her longer to recognize her gift because her spirit is disconnected from her being. Once she is on a healing journey, she will

begin discovering her gifts through healing. Individuals and the community can support the

facilitation process through relationality but it is up to the individual. Once she has recognized

her gifts, she will be able to master and share them with those around her.

Empowerment is most often described in the literature as personal control, as well as a

process of social change (Jennings et al., 2006; Lord & Hutchinson, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000).

For example, Rappaport (1987) describes the aim of empowerment as "to enhance the

possibilities for people to control their own lives" (p.119) as it "conveys both a psychological

sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power

and legal rights" (p.121). Further, Wallerstein (1992) describes empowerment as a social-action

process promoting participation of peoples, organizations, and communities towards an increased

level of control, efficacy and improved quality of community life, and social justice.

Empowerment is focused on three levels of change: psychological (individual), social, and

political (Lord & Hutchison, 2009). This thesis is focused on the psychological and social levels

of empowerment.

Table 6.1.

The Contrast and Comparison of Mamāhtāwicikew to Empowerment. The references provided in this table are in relation to the community psychology empowerment literature.

Mamāhtāwicikew (personal communication with Ms. Kingfisher and Ms. Bear)	Empowerment as described in the field of Community Psychology (Moritsugu et al., 2013)
Differences	
• Recognition of one's gift • Egalitarian (community, collaboration, and connections) • Relational (Individual level influences community level and vice versa) • Cultural/Spiritual • Based on Indigenous value system • Sense of belonging based on relationships with all of the creations (e.g., animals, land, water)	• Power over or authority to influence change • Authoritative (power and control) • Bipolar continuum (Individual empowerment vs. community empowerment; powerful vs. powerlessness) • Focused on economic and political power
Similarities	
Both mamāhtāwicikew and empowerment: • Are a process/mastery • Strengthen/develop confidence and self-identity • Identify, utilize, and maximize their potential • Support relationships (mentoring)	

A critique of the empowerment literature noted the lack of a concise definition of empowerment (Hennink, Kiiti, Pillinger, Jayakaran, 2012). However, Whitmore (1988) felt that there were common underlying assumptions of empowerment:

a) individuals are assumed to understand their own needs better than anyone else, and therefore should have the power to both define and act upon them.

b) all people possess strengths upon which they can build.

c) empowerment is a lifelong endeavor.

75

d) personal knowledge and experiences are valid and useful in coping effectively (as

quoted in Lord & Hutchinson, 2009).

These underlying assumptions are similar to mamāhtāwicikew as explained by Arlene Bear

(Nehiyawak (Cree) Teacher, Sturgeon Lake Central School). Ms. Bear indicated that to

understand the spiritual journey of mamāhtāwicikew, we must ground the analysis in the

Medicine Wheel (See Figure 6.1.). The Medicine Wheel contains traditional teachings, which are

used as a guide to demonstrate relationality through the interconnectedness and interrelatedness

of Indigenous culture (Robinson, Barrett, & Robinson, 2016).

Mamāhtāwicikew is the recognition of one's gifts given by the Creator, and is a lifelong

process. A version of the Medicine Wheel depicting mamāhtāwicikew as a process is shown in

Figure 6.1. People obtain their basic needs (i.e., food, love, safety and belonging), as well as

recognize, practice and share their gift, constantly striving for mamāhtāwicikew as they move

through the four cycles of life (i.e., Childhood, Youth, Adulthood, and Old Age). As one moves

through these stages, they are working towards mamāhtāwicikew. Mamāhtāwicikew typically

becomes recognized between the stages of childhood and youth. However, mamāhtāwicikew

does not emerge from a life stage. Rather, it evolves from what each of us considers to be our

own important accomplishments or qualities across the lifespan. For example, a girl may be an

excellent Jingle Dress Dancer, but if she believes her skill of being a Lacrosse player is most

important, then her gift will be that of a Lacrosse player versus a Jingle Dress Dancer.

Mamāhtāwicikew is not imposed on anyone - it is the recognition of one's gift as identified by

themselves.
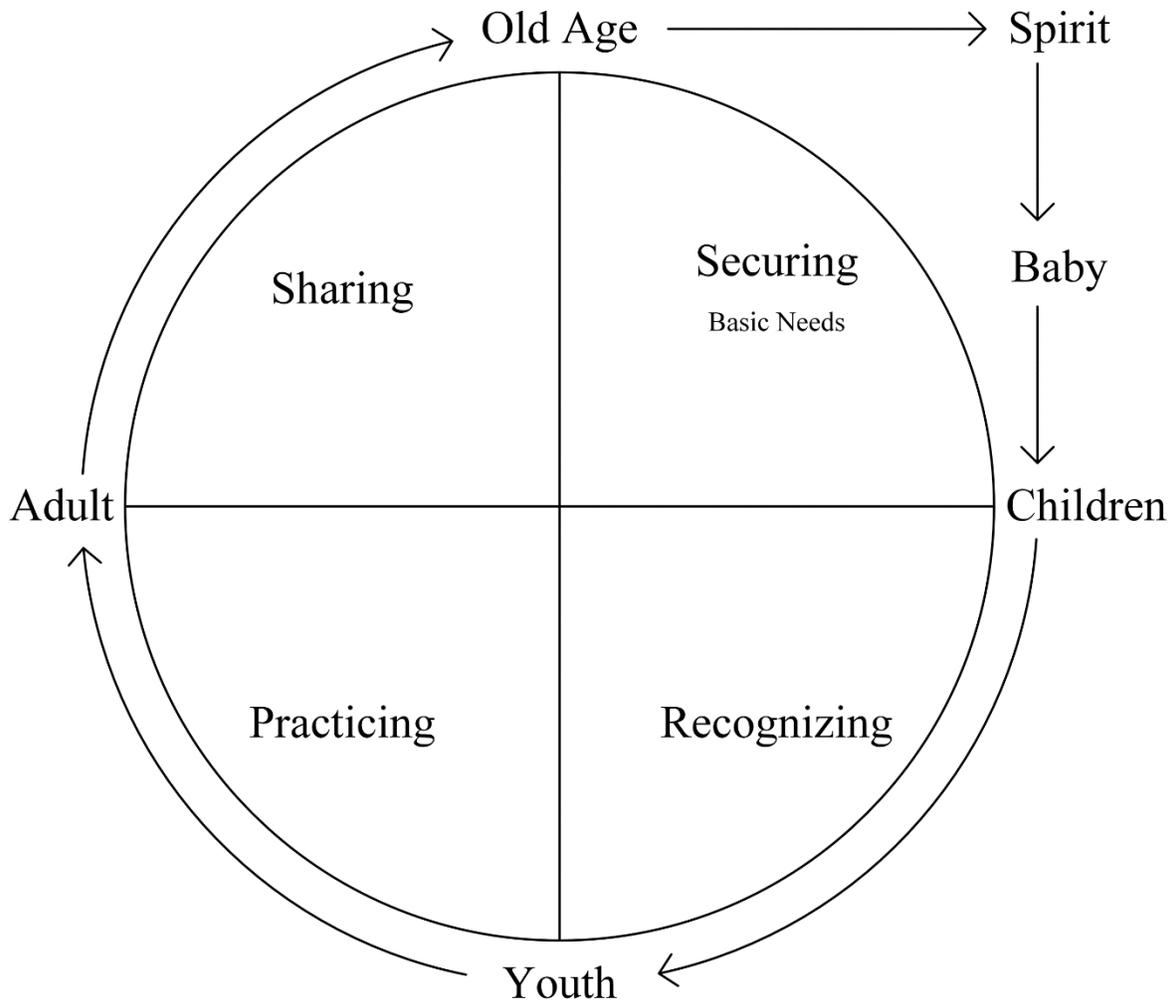
Figure 6.1. Analysis of mamāhtāwicikew through the Medicine Wheel, co-developed with Ms. Bear (Nehiyawak Teacher, Sturgeon Lake Central School).

It was recognized by the researcher, trained in Western psychology, that the girls were not achieving Maslow's hierarchy of needs (See Figure 3.1.). Maslow's (1943) theory regarding the hierarchy of needs was developed to demonstrate that people are able to achieve their potential when certain needs are not met. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is classified in three categories of motives: basic; physiological; and, self-fulfillment. The hierarchy was to

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[1] The information shared in this thesis related to the Medicine Wheel is as much as I am allowed to share for the purpose of this thesis. It was stated that a deeper understanding of mamāhtāwicikew would require obtaining a Masters in the Plains Cree culture.

demonstrate that lower level basic needs must be satisfied before progressing to higher-level

needs such as psychological and self-fulfillment. For example, physiological and safety needs

(e.g., food, shelter, sleep) are required before one can progress to social needs (e.g., belongings

and love). The hierarchical arrangement suggests that certain needs take priority over others,

however it does not provide details about the interconnectedness, nor how these shift over time.

Further, it does not extrapolate how individuals who achieve a low level of basic and

psychological needs (e.g., safety, food insecurity, and a sense of belongness) can continue to

reach and achieve self-actualization. We can evolve Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to be one of

relationality; where motives are interdependent of each other, and when balance is achieved, an

individual will reach a self-actualizing state.

Referring back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (See Figure 3.1.), elements of the basic

needs are seen in the Medicine Wheel. When you weave together worldviews, Euro-western and

Indigenous, we are able to identify the essential needs that individuals have been deprived of and

require to equip themselves in defining, redefining, and pursuing meaning in life in order to

achieve their full potential (Mussell, 2005). When we evolve Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to

be one of relationality, we can express this model through the Medicine Wheel (See Figure 6.1.).

The Medicine Wheel symbolizes the dynamic relationship between mind, body, emotions, and

spirit, whereby the needs related with each must be met for the development of human potential.

This started the conversation between the researcher and Ms. Bear about ways to weave the

worldviews, and the discourse around grounding the analysis in the Medicine Wheel. Maslow's

hierarchy of needs does not reflect the fluidity in securing needs, nor how reaching 'self-

actualization' is merely a continuous process that evolves over time rather than being in a stable

state. For example, it does not represent how achieving one's full potential is a lifelong process,

as described by Ms. Bear and represented in Figure 6.1. The Medicine Wheel depicted in Figure 3.2., and the analysis of mamāhtāwicikew through the Medicine Wheel in Figure 6.1., acknowledge that we are born with gifts, and the movement towards our gifts is the foundation to our health and well-being. The movement towards sharing one's gift is what provides meaning to life, and the gift provides life's purpose and direction.

An individual who is able to secure the essential physical and emotional needs is able to focus on developing one's sense of self through the creation of knowledge or tools that assists them to define, redefine, and pursue meaning in life, which is associated with intellectual and spiritual growth (Mussell, 2005). Individuals who strive for harmony within the Medicine Wheel develop strong spiritual identities that enrich their existence and inspire them to share their gifts. These individuals believe in their ability to make informed decisions, and to pay attention to their intuitiveness and use it as a guide in their lives; it is connected to a spiritual state that reflects inner peace, personal harmony and balance (Mussell, 2005). This aligns with mamāhtāwicikew as explained by Ms. Kingfisher and Ms. Bear, as it is about the individual recognizing, practicing, and sharing their spiritual gift with all of creation.

Description of Being a Girl

A significant finding from this study is the symbolism associated with the animals that the girls discussed**.** The girls said they were not afraid of bears and wolves. In the Plains Cree culture, animals are viewed as protectors and have symbolic meaning, as shared with us by community Elders. The Elder in residence at Sturgeon Lake Central School provided the following philosophies on the symbolism of these animals. In Plains Cree, animals such as the bear and wolf symbolize courage and humility, respectively. The bear represents courage because of its strengths and natural ability to overcome challenges. The bear demonstrates that

there is time to be playful, and on other occasions to be assertive and courageous. It also

represents how to live a balanced life as it hibernates in the winter. Having the mental and moral

strength to overcome fears is a great challenge that must be met with the same energy and

intensity as a mother bear protecting her cub. The girls saying that they are not afraid of bears

could mean that the bear calls them to awaken the potential within themselves, and to stand up

for what they believe in. Ms. Kingfisher also provided the story of how the Grizzly Bear walks

with her and is her protector. Wolves represent humility as they live in a pack. Each wolf has a

role to play within the pack (e.g., hunter, nurturer or protector); no wolf is more important than

the others, as each wolf is key for the survival and betterment of the pack. A wolf could represent

the girls' humbleness and respect for their community. It is also important to look at the

symbolism as the girls are transitioning into womanhood, and the spiritual world in which they

begin to recognize their gifts.

Roadblocks to Empowerment

This study has shown that girls' experiences are influenced by poverty, violence, bullying

and abuse. The girls in the community could discuss these experiences, or roadblocks to

empowerment, more frequently than they were able to talk about their experiences of

empowerment. An explanation for this is that mamāhtāwicikew was disrupted through Canada's

colonial past, causing poor social conditions in which young First Nation girls are raised (e.g.,

poverty, overcrowding, abuse) through intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma has

led to powerlessness within First Nation communities (Anderson, 2011). Powerlessness (also

referred to as learned helplessness and internalized oppression) is the expectation that one has on

his/her actions will be ineffective in influencing change (Wallerstein, 1992). This aligns with

Rotter's (1966) work on external locus of control; the degree to which people believe that they

have no control over the outcome of events in their lives, as opposed to internal forces within their control. According to Ms. Kingfisher, the girls involved in the project had difficulty recognizing their gifts or experiencing empowerment because their spirit had been wounded. Colonialism has disrupted all of the essential needs (e.g., physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual) in First Nation communities and has wounded their spirits (Lavallee & Poole, 2009). Imagination by First Nation peoples has been disrupted through the process of assimilation. For example, the removal of Indigenous children from families and communities. In addition, oppression suppresses people's ability to express feelings, opinions, ideas, and actions (Goulet et al., 2011). Indigenous healing models acknowledge the wounded identity and spirit of Indigenous peoples and the need to co-create spaces to allow people to learn about their spiritual and cultural transitions (Lavallee & Poole, 2009).

As leaders of the project, it was vital that Ms. Sundown and I co-created a safe space for the girls to feel comfortable expressing their experiences of empowerment, and roadblocks to empowerment, to facilitate transformational change in the community. The top three roadblocks to empowerment were not surprising because of the demographic of the population. It is known that bullying, unfortunately, is common in elementary age groups. Further, as highlighted in the literature, hunger and substance abuse is elevated in First Nation populations (Power, 2008; Totten, 2009; Trocmé et al., 2005; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004).

Girls' Description of Empowerment

The girls were able to describe girl empowerment, but had difficulty relating it to their own lives. To address this, it was important for the girls to actively participate in decision-making to develop solutions to roadblocks of empowerment based on their lived experiences. It is important for girl empowerment programs to help facilitate the girls' development of a strong

sense of self, and to recognize their gifts. Girls' need to feel secure and that they have their basic needs met before they can recognize their gifts (as depicted in Figure 3.1. and Figure 6.1.). The recognition of one's gifts and abilities is not exclusive to Indigenous girls; however the research focused on the experiences of girls living at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. The girls learning the roles of women pre-European contact was empowering, as women play a significant role in the re-powering of communities. Empowering young girls to work on their self-concept and to heal from intergenerational trauma will help rebuild First Nation communities through political, social and economic growth. An interesting finding of this study was the girl who said, "My Mom is brave for doing something courageous like raising me for 12 years and not giving up on doing anything." This demonstrates the resiliency and strength of Indigenous women, and how they continue to persevere (Amnesty International, 2009; 2014; de Finney, 2014; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2007; United Nations, 2010).

Youth Reflection

It was important to have Ms. Sundown reflect on the process of co-facilitating the research in order to obtain feedback, but also to ensure that the process was engaging and exciting for the girls including herself. Although only a reflection about the overall experience is provided, there was integrated reflection in the process of the research to ensure it was built on a foundation of relationality, and that Ms. Sundown knew she had knowledge and resources to contribute to the process of the research. She helped ground the research in the everyday experiences of the girls, providing a solid foundation on how to navigate, the best ways to collect data, and the type of data to collect. The relationship with Miss Sundown was essential in this research, and was developed from my community involvement and through informal conversations. As demonstrated in the reflection, having a young adult was 'fun and interesting';

this is important in the facilitation of the research, as it involved two friends co-creating

knowledge from different experiences and viewpoints, but ultimately working toward the same

goal. Through relatability it was easy to establish a relationship with Ms. Sundown and sharing

experiences outside the research space.

Self-Reflection

As part of any participatory research project, it was essential to take field notes to reflect

on the process of my experiences with and within the community, as well as, my personal

reflections on the processes. Over the course of the study, it was essential for me to critically

reflect, to continuously self-evaluate my practice of cultural humility, and to ensure that the

research was reflective of the girls and needs of the community, rather than a research agenda

applied on the process. Although cultural humility is not explicitly identified as a theoretical

construct in this thesis, it has been practiced through my writing of a research journal explicating

personal reactions, reflections and insights into self, and in the relationships, I developed.

Cultural humility is the process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic biases,

which are important for developing and maintaining respectful processes to build relationships

on meaningful trust (First Nations Health Authority, 2016). When designing the research

processes, it was necessary for the research to be reflective of the girls' experience, to be fun, and

to foster a co-learning environment.

It was imperative that I co-learned with the girls about what empowerment meant to

them, so I could use this research as a tool to co-develop local solutions. However, I was

challenged as a researcher on how the research was 'supposed' to be conducted, versus how I

wanted to conduct it (i.e., in a meaningful, collaborative way). Research is often used as a tool to

retroactively explore a phenomenon, or to employ a deficit approach. However, to conduct

transformative research in the area of youth mental health, it is essential that research is locally-developed and youth-centric, utilizing a strength-based, preventive approach to community development of youth empowerment programs. Therefore, it was important for me to sit, listen, and play with the girls to ensure that the research was community-oriented.

I did not attend research sessions with pre-prescribed notions of what we were going to be doing, which was sometimes challenging because I never knew if I was prepared enough. I was also concerned about missing the opportunity to ask something important because I was not well-prepared or versed in the literature. However, I was told that for this research to be authentic, I needed to let go of the 'worry', and to take the approach of "what was to happen would happen". Although "what if" questions plagued me on my drive to the community, I knew that if something were missed on this trip, we would compromise, or it would be completed the next time. I started to embrace this new approach, as it allowed the research to flow in a different direction. It allowed me to work more authentically with the community to describe what the research outcomes could become. My active presence in the community allowed me to form informal relationships through authentic engagement. It was imperative that I worked with the girls to co-design and develop the research, ensuring that it was relatable and fun for them. They also shared with me the gift of laughter, and how important laughter is to the Cree culture.

It was essential that the girls and I had the opportunity to reflect on the research process both before and after each session to help ensure that the meetings were relevant. Each research session closed with a reflection on what everyone enjoyed during the meeting, and what we could improve on for next time. The girls almost always enjoyed the ice-breaker activities the most. They particularly liked the snowball game and asked to replay it at the next session. Areas of improvements were related to the time of sessions (i.e., after school versus lunchtime) and

choice of food. To address these matters, we switched the sessions to later in the afternoon, and I was instructed to purchase juice without berries for the girls on the Strawberry Fast. It was also essential to learn from the girls the structure of the Girl Power Program sessions. At the start of one session, one girl reminded me that we needed to get 'the rock' from Ms. Thornton's classroom as the talking object for the beginning of the meeting, since that was the procedure used in Girl Power.

Throughout the research, I engaged in local youth activities to establish authentic relationships. These were relationships I cherished dearly, which have in turn taught me so much about myself. The relationships formed with the girls, Ms. Kingfisher, and Ms. Thornton have become like family, and they were supportive when things did not go as planned. I marked the success of this research endeavor through my playful spirit as it allowed me to successfully build meaningful relationships with the girls. I could sit on the ground and talk pop culture, play soccer, or even be the friend they turn to on a bad day to talk about life, which is what has contributed to the success of this research. At times, adults and researchers become too serious and focused, and we must remember that sometimes, all we need to do is play and share stories to create hope and identify opportunities for change.

I learned with the girls, and shared their experiences and stories. Co-learning with the girls as a result of shared stories demonstrated the power and strength of working together for the collective while building capacity with each other. We learned that no matter the adversities one may face, it is essential to recognize and celebrate the strength it takes to overcome obstacles. Further, we learned about the spirit, and how negativity from others in the form of jealousy and anger is not ours, and that it can become harmful. This was probably the most crucial teaching I received throughout my Masters, and it was what gave me the courage to finish my thesis. If it

was not for the authentic relationships I formed, this thesis would never be completed and therefore, I thank all those who have modeled strength, determination, and āhkamēyimowin.

The ability to act morally to ensure the research was authentic and reflected the experiences of the girls at Sturgeon Lake First Nation who taught me a lot about my inner strength. It is easy for researchers to follow the 'status quo,' but to transform systems and authentically engage community members, it is imperative to have the moral courage to speak up about the injustices and inaccuracies that research has created in the past and continues to create. Personally, it was common sense that youth research should be authentically co-created and co-developed with youth themselves as they are the mobilizers for change. It was natural for me as my mother has always role modeled āhkamēyimowin, and I always employ a participatory approach when developing programs (Gaspar & Absher, 2018). However, I realized not all researchers use community-engaged participatory research methods with youth. It became apparent to me that the approach taken in this research was transformative and positive when co-presenting with Ms. Sundown at a local conference. She was brought to tears when she saw her words on the Poster (See Appendix A); the same words shared in her reflection in this thesis. It was at that moment when I knew I advocated not for my liberty, but for Ms. Sundown to see the importance for research to be authentically created. It was important for me to demonstrate *sohkitaman,* being strong minded and following my heart to ensure the research was done in a good way.

Āhkamēyimowin

Āhkamēyimowin in this study is two-fold: the perseverance of the girls despite social, political, and economical adversities. They continue to overcome roadblocks to empowerment through their strength, courage, bravery and support from positive relations with family and

86

friends to strive towards mamāhtāwicikēwin, as depicted in Figure 6.1. Further, this is demonstrated in how the girls described empowerment, focusing on the strength and perseverance of women by having support. Lastly, it's through the creation of transformative spaces, such as the Girl Power Program, that foster a safe, trusting and welcoming space for girls to collectively share stories of strength and perseverance. Ms. Kingfisher and Ms. Thornton supported the girls, *ta-ka-mēyimocihk* by encouraging them to leave their comfort zone and make positive life changes rather than continuing to make choices based on exposure (e.g., what they know), and to achieve mamāhtāwicikēwin through the connection of spirituality. Āhkamēyimowin is the process in which girls achieve mamāhtāwicikēwin through their connection to spirituality and self-care, and developing a sense of hope and purpose to overcome anything by receiving guidance.

The concepts of āhkamēyimowin and mamāhtāwicikēwin are not static, and are ever-changing in a relation of webs. It is important to note that the process by which knowledge is co-created is as essential as the knowledge produced. When facilitators role-model perseverance through a positive attitude, youth foster a growth mindset in which they explore their gifts and abilities through passion, dedication and deliberate practice; it involves continuously persevering despite adversity or obstacles. This research celebrates the strengths of all those involved, and demonstrates the importance of relationship and the crucial role that relationality plays in developing and implementing integrative and empowering processes. We were able to co-create research in such a way that we could deepen the understanding of facilitating transformative action processes and paradoxes to demonstrate empowerment as a relational process that is always evolving based on authentic relationships. To conduct research authentically and walk beside the girls as they developed was essential to establishing a sustainable relationship.

Transformative Action-oriented Research Loop

The action research loops are depicted in Figure 6.2. This project studied the term mamāhtāwicikew, and how girls in the Girl Power Program described it, as well as their experiences with roadblocks to empowerment (See Figure 5.7.). The next phase is to continue building girls' self-esteem and self-confidence through empowerment initiatives such as the Girl Power Program and the ACCESS Open Minds project which helped the girls to heal. It is important to have the girls play active roles in the decision-making process of activities and programs in these initiatives to support self-discovery of their gifts. This project identified an opportunity for change through the development of an ACCESS Open Minds youth community garden, and for continuing with sports outreach activities in the villages during the summer months to combat hunger (which was completed in the summer of 2017). An employment opportunity was secured for Ms. Sundown to continue to build upon the skills she developed through co-facilitating the research project in the summer of 2017. She worked to implement the girls' ideas on opportunities for change (i.e., the garden and sporting activities). Further, the girls asked if the Girl Power Program could be more frequent, as it was what they looked forward to most in their week; they also asked to have more field trips to learn and explore. This is something Ms. Thornton is working on but due to limited human resources, it is challenging. Future research studies would be needed to examine girl-identified indicators of searching for mamāhtāwicikew, to conduct a similar study with boys between the ages of 10 and 15 years, and to conduct a longitudinal study monitoring the indicators of mamāhtāwicikew, and their influence on health and well-being.
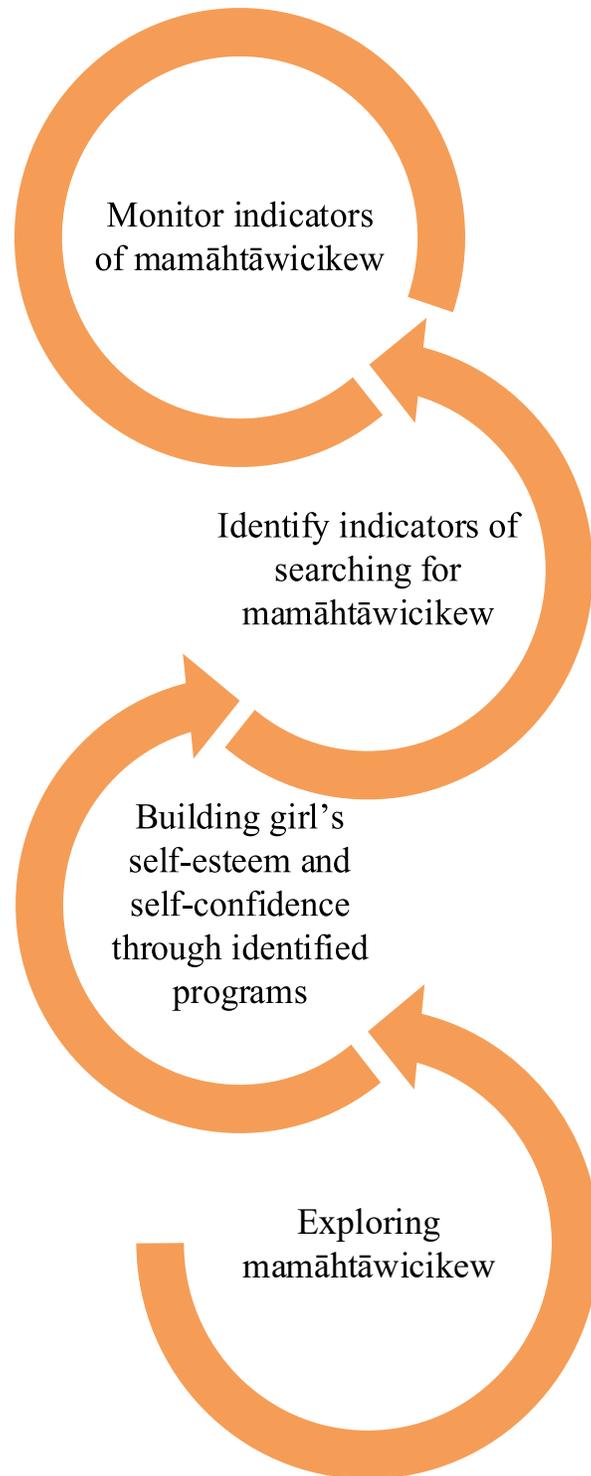
Figure 6.2. Transformative action-oriented research loops to inform future studies in collaboration with the Girl Power Program.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was that not all senior mentors participated. Despite working with Ms. Sundown, it was difficult to attract and retain participation from older girl mentors, aged 13 to 15 years, in the Girl Power Program. Ms. Sundown mentioned that one of the older girls 'was too shy to participate, but had a lot to share'. Another junior mentor was shy, and was identified as having social anxiety and therefore did not want to participate. Ms. Thornton has also documented difficulty retaining senior mentors' participation in the Girl Power Program, as many of them stopped participating because of moving away due to child welfare involvement, or prioritizing being in a relationship over Girl Power. To address this challenge, a future semi-structured one-on-one interview study with the older girls could be carried out to have them describe their lived experience of empowerment and identify barriers to empowerment. Another limitation is that not all the girls consistently participated in all the groups, as they had other after school programing (e.g., skirt-making or beading), or were required to babysit. Although this is the nature of community-based research, the facilitators of the research attempted to accurately reproduce each session for those who were missing. Further, there were limitations of the researcher, as I did not speak the Plains Cree language, and analysis of the term 'mamāhtāwicikew' relied heavily on Ms. Kingfisher and Ms. Bear. Lastly, the timeframe for this project was condensed to a Master's thesis. This project has grown with the Girl Power Program, and the facilitators of said program will work with the girls on a follow-up study in the search of mamāhtāwicikew. The findings of this project, as well as the process, has influenced the Girl Power Program sessions and continue to teach the girls about empowerment. Further, this study does not examine the social or political environment, and how it might influence long-term change in a First Nation community.

Chapter Seven: Summary/Conclusion

This study was conducted with girls who reside at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. Even though the findings cannot be generalizable, the process is nevertheless transferrable. The findings of this study suggest that YPR integrated with action-oriented methods and transformative learning with First Nation girls was successful in developing programing in the ACCESS Open Minds implementation science project. The purpose of this study was to explore the term mamāhtāwikew, and to illuminate how Plains Cree girls in the Girl Power Program at the Sturgeon Lake Central School described experiences of empowerment and identified opportunities for change. Through this exploratory study, the central objective was to make meaning of the everyday experiences of the girls who experienced both empowering and barriers to empowerment through the overlap areas of YPR integrated with transformative action-oriented methods, empowerment, and relationality. Through this, we were able to collectively work together to identify opportunities and implement action to foster positive change.

Empowerment of First Nation girls cannot be fully understood without examining the historical and ongoing colonization of Indigenous women and girls, and the effect it has had on empowerment. The roadblocks identified in this thesis can be explained as a consequence of the intergenerational effects of colonialism. To positively create change, solutions should be co-developed with the community to influence sustainable, long-lasting and meaningful change. This study is timely and relevant due to recent shifts towards participatory research in health sciences, as well as with the introduction of the Canadian Institute of Health Research's Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research in Canada. Consistent with the transformational research in Adolescents Mental Health, YPR can promote young people's engagement as a much-needed asset in transforming mental health services within a holistic preventive approach.

Understanding empowerment initiatives as they relate to YPR and youth engagement gives stakeholders in academia, government, community-based organizations, and communities an illuminated perspective into health promotion and policy-development from a value-based approach for First Nation girls. With the paradigm shift in Canada to patient-oriented research, the voices of those who are most marginalized in Canadian society, and who face the greatest health disparities, can be heard and help policy-makers to co-create culturally-appropriate empowerment initiatives to overcome the systematic barriers to empowerment caused by colonialism, harmful government policies, and contemporary forms of racism. Further, through āhkamēyimowin, we begin to shift the language of youth empowerment programs from suicide prevention to life promotion which celebrates the strengths and perseverance of Indigenous peoples. Walking with youth to provide support and direction to empower themselves to make positive, healthy choices to live a balanced and holistic life through perseverance is required to help youth overcome barriers of empowerment.

Through authentic relationships and sharing of stories, transformative frameworks can be developed with a focus not only on the well-being of Indigenous girls, but also creating sustainable practices for any community development or youth empowerment programs that fosters social change. The study described empowerment as a transformative, action-oriented process that is continuously evolving through stories. Empowerment facilitated through āhkamēyimowin: a safe space where sharing of stories through dialogue and praxis avails to promote hope and courage within the girls to achieve both self and community empowerment. By weaving together spiritual growth and healing, language, authentic relationships, trust, and honesty, this study was able to influence positive change within community youth empowerment programs, the researcher, and the girls themselves. Research must lead to meaningful change in

92

the community by building capacity, providing opportunities, as well as, actively listening and engaging youth. This research created a transformative therapeutic space to co-facilitate empowerment through the sharing of stories and knowledge to celebrate women's strength and āhkamēyimowin.

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Appendix A

Culturally Understanding Empowerment to Inform Community Development Research in a First Nation Community

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WHAT WE FOUND:

Mamãhtãwicikew is the recognition of an individuals spiritual gift(s)	Mamãhtãwicikew is when you have a strong self-concept and are confident in who you are	Girls talk about disempowerment more frequently than empowerment

Background

- This exploratory study materialized through community involvement establishing a community-university partnership with The Girl Power Program in Sturgeon Lake First Nation (SLFN), Saskatchewan.

- Girl Power is an after-school program that helps girls between the ages of 10 to 15 to mitigate risk factors including, sexual violence and abuse, parental neglect, and teenage pregnancy.

- This community-based research project studies how girls involved in Girl Power describe the concept of *mamãhtãwicikew* (empowerment in Plains Cree).

- Girl empowerment is an important topic for researchers, political leaders, health care professionals, educators, community developers and policy makers to be focusing globally as a protective factor for womanhood.

- The purpose of this research was to illuminate the experiences of SLFN girls in relation to 'empowerment' and 'disempowerment' to discover strategies used to foster empowerment and identify opportunities for community development.

Research Questions

1. How does the traditional knowledge keeper in the Girl Power program conceptualize the concept of mamãhtãwicikew?

2. How do the girls living at SLFN describe empowerment drawing upon English and Cree descriptions of the terms mamãhtãwicikew and empowerment?

3. What do the girls describe as empowering and identify as program development in their community?

Methods

Participants:
- Ten Girl Power participants,10 to 12 years old.
- Co-designed and co-facilitated by a Senior Girl Power participant (15 years old).

Procedure:
- In partnership with Sturgeon Lake Central School, SLFN, Saskatchewan, this community-based participatory project studied the ways in which girls, described the concept of mamãhtãwicikew/empowerment.
- Traditional protocols were followed (gifting of cloth and tobacco).
- A planning session included a First Nation's empowerment example "Shannen's Dream".
- Five focus groups using arts-based methods, approximately 1.5 hours per session were held.
- Girls were invited to create an 'Empowerment Blueprint' based on their description of mamãhtãwicikew/empowerment?
- A Certificate of Approval was obtained from the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board.

Findings

The findings highlight :

- The importance of including the voices of First Nation girls' in the design and delivery of empowerment initiatives and the value of collaborative value-based research methods in mobilizing girls' commitment towards social change grounded in their experiences.

- Aligning with the UN Development Goals, the girls identified barriers to empowerment as hunger and poverty which influences their health and well-being.

Girl's collectively described mamãhtãwicikew as:

"bravery, because we are strong and not afraid of bullies or seeing the world; we protect ourselves and our family; courageous, to stand up to bad people and walk away from them, to say no to drugs and alcohol; smart, we could do so much that we don't even know about, we can do anything we want, doctors, lawyers, nurses and teachers; she knows what she wants; feelings a girl has or how she sees herself; not being shy, putting yourself out there; caring for each other with love; having a powerful voice and using it; standing up to bullies and for herself; doing what you love, playing sports and being artistic; happy, girls want to be happy all the time; being beautiful; without all these things we wouldn't be ourselves"

Quote by Senior Girl Power Participant on collaboratively conducting community development research:

"Working with a young adult has been fun and interesting. When working with CG, I built a bond with her. She knew what to do and say when it came to talking about subjects and things that she needed to know. She made research fun, which I thought was going to be boring. She also understood what my knowledge could take and how much information I could handle. She made me think outside the box. The outcomes of working with her, are that when you do research and work together, both of us learned things and our knowledge was on the same page. Working with her has been the best and I couldn't have asked for another person to do it with."

Discussion

- Mamãhtãwicikew has been disrupted through Canada's colonial past.

- Intergenerational trauma has led to learned helplessness within First Nation communities.

- Transforming cultural trauma through mamãhtãwicikew is timely given the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

- Canada needs more girl empowerment programs that help girls develop a strong self-identity grounded in their culture.

- The benefits of this study were to illuminate how girls in SLFN experienced various influences that shaped their daily lives, and how they characterized these influences as empowering or disempowering.

- To address the barrier of hunger the Sturgeon Lake Central School and ACCESS Open Minds Youth Centre partnered to develop a youth garden.

- The research demonstrated a role that young adults can play in facilitating empowerment through research in community development.
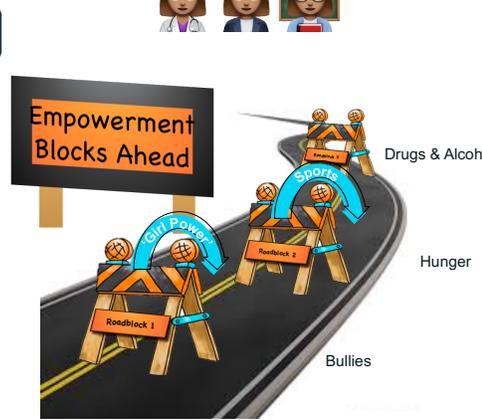

Figure 1. Roadblocks to Empowerment. This figure shows the top 3 girls identified roadblocks to empowerment in Sturgeon Lake First Nation with programs that support girl empowerment in the blue arrows.

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