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# A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Indigenous High School Students Enrolled within a Youth Leadership Pathway

Final Report for McDowell Foundation

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# Pathways to Beginning: Overview

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## Guiding Wonders

*“GYM is starting a new road and a new beginning. This road that I have started is a pathway to greatness, it has shown me who I really am, and what I want to do. GYM is helping me find myself by bringing out the best in me.” – Kate, Grade 10*

When we began this work, we held wonders of how Indigenous youth composed their identities and sustained their lives on school landscapes. For some on our research team they had lived alongside the Indigenous youth who became part of our research for several years as teachers (Brian Lewis, Tamara Ryba, Brett Kannenberg). For others on our research team, they came from university places (Michael Dubnewick, Tristan Hopper, Sean Lessard) and had just begun to step into the midst of the Scott Collegiate school landscape, the leadership pathway, Growing Young Movers (GYM), and the lives of the Indigenous youth that they eventually came to know. Our research team primarily consisted of non-Indigenous researchers (which included Brian Lewis, Tamara Ryba, Brett Kannenberg, Michael Dubnewick, and Tristan Hopper). Knowing how we were positioned as settler scholars and practitioners, we each considered how we were becoming more attentive to Indigenous youth. Part of that meant drawing on our pre-existing relations with Sean Lessard, who is an Indigenous scholar from Montreal Lake Cree Nation. Another part was working alongside the long-time friend, guide, and Knowledge Keeper Joseph Naytowhow. In short, Joseph acted as a guide for many members on our research team as we came to understand our interactions and responsibilities with the young people we engaged with. As a community of researchers, we each came to this work wanting to better understand and attend to the experiences of the Indigenous youth who were part of the leadership pathway in ways where we could wonder less about how to fit the youth within the school landscape and more towards how we could imagine the school landscape better fitting and attending to the lives of the youth. Given that the leadership pathway at Scott Collegiate was intentionally created in ways to reimagine how schools could be structured, our work and time alongside the youth allowed us to better understand if this pathway was experienced as educative and respectful to the lives of the youth. Or stated differently, was the leadership pathway working for the youth?

Was it respectful and relevant within their ongoing life-making? As we write this, we think of the words one of the youths wrote, which sits at the beginning of this section. We sit with Kate's words not to signal those initiatives such as the leadership pathway are the way forward; rather, we share those words to remind ourselves and ask you, the reader, to consider some of the aspects that the youth asked us to consider, so a response like this became possible.

## Context of the Leadership Pathway

The Leadership Pathway at Scott Collegiate was created through a partnership between the non-profit Growing Young Movers Youth Development Inc., the City of Regina, and Regina Public Schools. High school students (Grade 10 to 12) within this leadership pathway are in grade-specific cohorts each afternoon and then transition to working as mentors within the established GYM after-school wellness programs at the m̄maw̄yatit̄n centre. Within this leadership pathway, high school students are introduced to credit courses around leadership, cultural arts, land-based education, outdoor education, and physical education. The skills enhanced in these pathway courses are utilized in the GYM programs. The high school students are employed as mentors as part of the GYM facilitation team. As mentors they support after-school programming for North Central youth centred around four tenets: physical activity, personal responsibility, culture, and positive youth development. The mentors/high school students receive school credit, training, certificates, and valuable work experience that will enhance opportunities for future employment, transition to post-secondary and high school completion with a detailed plan upon graduation. The leadership pathway is the first of its kind in Saskatchewan when it comes to integrating school-based education with employment through a non-profit organization (i.e., GYM).

The leadership pathway grew out of previous research alongside Indigenous youth (Lewis, 2018; Lessard, 2015) and is designed to acknowledge and respect the innate leadership skills of Indigenous high school students while providing employment and transition opportunities. Often when leadership programs are implemented, the programs are seen as an ideal place to "fix" or to "develop" Indigenous youth into proper citizens (Gartner-Manzon & Giles, 2018). While these initiatives are well-intentioned, they position Indigenous youth as deficit and without knowledge. It can be argued that school/programs that look to "develop" Indigenous youth through such a lens are not attentive to the four R's that Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) outlined. For programs, and research to be beneficial, they must respect who Indigenous youth are and are becoming, be relevant to their world and worldview, offer reciprocal relationships, and support them as they exercise responsibility over their own lives.

Drawing on the previous work of Lessard (2015), the pathway intentionally (re)positioned the Indigenous youth as leaders within their community through the leadership pathway and GYM. As we share the findings from living alongside the youth, we wondered whether this (re)positioning shifts how they composed their lives on school landscapes in more sustaining ways. As teachers and researchers, we were interested in learning from the youth to better understand if GYM and the leadership pathway are attentive to how the youth are attempting to compose their lives in relation to the four R's (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Within this report we share how this pathway supported spaces where youth composed counter stories to dominant deficit-based narratives and storied themselves as knowledge holders, teachers, role models, and leaders.

## Social Context and Indigenous Youth: A Rationale and Statement of Need

It is widely known that Indigenous high school graduation rates within Saskatchewan are an issue that has not been addressed historically and/or in the current social context. A brief context shows; (1) The graduation rate of Indigenous youth in Saskatchewan is 43.2 percent, compared to 85.4 percent non-Indigenous youth (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2018). (2) The unemployment rate in Saskatchewan of Indigenous peoples is 14.7 percent, compared to 4.2 percent of non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, 2016). (3) While Indigenous peoples represented 16 percent of the province's population, 74 percent of admissions to custody were Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2016). These lower levels of education, higher rates of unemployment, as well as higher rates of incarceration have contributed to serious health issues among Indigenous peoples, including higher risk of illness, higher rates of suicide, and higher rates of mental illness than rates among the non-Indigenous population.

Such racialized inequalities underscore the complex legacy and ongoing manifestations of settler-colonialism in Canada – and in Saskatchewan specifically – and the categorical failure of successive levels of Canadian government to reconcile the long-standing social issues associated with this history. If improvements were made to the educational attainment of Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan, different scenarios could materialize. However, it is clear that the established and dominant way of structuring school is not working, and that changes need to be made. There is a need to look at how school can work for Indigenous youth rather than trying to fit these young people into a colonial system that continues to fail them. Research demonstrates that part of the difficulty associated with colonial assimilation sits in the tensions experienced when the familial knowledge of Indigenous youth bumps into institutional knowledge found in school and after-school wellness curricula. Huber, Murphy, and Clandinin (2011) theoretically conceptualized that youth negotiate two worlds of curriculum making – the familial curriculum-making world and the school or institutional curriculum-making world. What becomes troubling as youth navigate both worlds is how knowledge in each of these worlds is positioned and which is valued. Lessard's (2015) work demonstrated how Indigenous youths' familial knowledge is often discounted as school/institutional curriculum takes precedence. Meaning, that Indigenous youth are often storied by schools as people without knowledge and being taught to become competent citizens through schooling. It is this positioning of Indigenous youth as without knowledge that has limited Indigenous youth from sustaining themselves and successfully navigate school landscapes (Halas et al., 2012). Given this research, it is important to reconsider how school can position Indigenous youth as people with knowledge. This is what the leadership pathway sought to do; by acknowledging that youth have and come to school with knowledge, and that it is possible to position them as knowledge holders (i.e., employed as mentors as part of GYM) to create literal and metaphorical pathways in schools that allows the youth to share their strengths.

## Research Puzzle: Research Question, Purpose, and Objectives

This research was a narrative inquiry into the experiences of Indigenous high school students who are part of the leadership pathway and GYM after-school program at Scott Collegiate. Specifically, we were interested in exploring the knowledge youth bring to the leadership pathway and how they compose their lives as leaders in these places. More broadly, we wondered how the Indigenous youth who are part of the pathway experienced the initiative as sustaining to their ongoing life-making.

Specifically, we were interested in exploring the knowledge youth bring to the leadership pathway and how they compose their lives as leaders in these places. More broadly, we wonder what does it mean to be a leader from an Indigenous youth's perspective? As we inquire into the youths' experiences of living as leaders, we wonder how their stories can shape, or interrupt, the dominant deficit-based narratives that limit the complexity and particularity of youths' lives.

As we began this work, we were puzzling over questions such as: Does the leadership pathway support a space where youth can compose counter stories to dominant deficit-based narratives and be seen as knowledge holders? Does the space support youth as they exercise personal responsibility over their own lives and dreams? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this leadership pathway as experienced by the students? Is it relevant, respectful, and relational? (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991.)

This research addresses a clear knowledge gap in the education, leadership, and Indigenous youth-focused literature and supports government and non-government organizations in their endeavours to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action (2015). In situating this research proposal within the context of leadership, our research team acknowledges the distinctive cultural histories and teachings that are foundational to these spaces. As part of our inquiry, we actively address the TRC Calls to Action in the areas of Education and Reconciliation (Calls to action six to 12) by reimagining educational pathways alongside Indigenous youth and their families in ways that the youth feel sustained as they navigate school landscapes. In our findings and discussion sections we will discuss what the youth have asked us to consider working towards when creating alternative pathways within the school landscape that sustain their life-making in good ways.

# Methodology

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## What is Narrative Inquiry?

Narrative inquiry (as defined by Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is a methodology that understands experience as a storied phenomenon and that people's storied experiences are embedded within social, cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives. As a relational research methodology, narrative inquiry seeks to position the researcher(s) as part of the inquiry where researcher(s) and participant(s) live alongside one another over time. In the simplest sense, narrative inquiry is a methodology that studies people's experiences in storied ways. As we engaged in our narrative inquiry into the experiences of Indigenous youth, we continually reminded ourselves to be as attentive as we could to the everyday, ordinary lived experiences of the Indigenous youth we were living alongside so we could better understand the stories they were living and telling of their lives as they negotiated the school landscape. Below we provide a more practical guide of how we actually lived alongside as we engaged in this narrative inquiry.

## How We Engaged in the Research and With Indigenous Youth

Within this section we will outline how we engaged in the research process as we lived alongside 10 Indigenous youth who were part of the leadership pathway to better understand their experiences within the initiative. As a broad overview, our research engaged in the following research process, beginning with: (a) autobiographical/reflexive inquiries, (b) reiterative and collaborative research conversation/interview planning and implementation, (c) writing of individual narrative accounts, (d) collaborative discussion and sharing of narrative accounts, (e) writing and identifying of threads/findings. What follows is an explanation of these steps within our research process.

*Autobiographical/reflexive inquiries:* One of the touchstones for carrying out meaningful narrative inquiries requires that researchers reflect and inquire into their own stories or experiences in relation to the research topic (Dubnewick et al., 2018). The reason for undertaking reflexive inquiries into one's own understanding of the research topic is that it allows the researchers to notice when they are overlaying or silencing the story of their participants. As our research team gathered in the early part of the research, we came

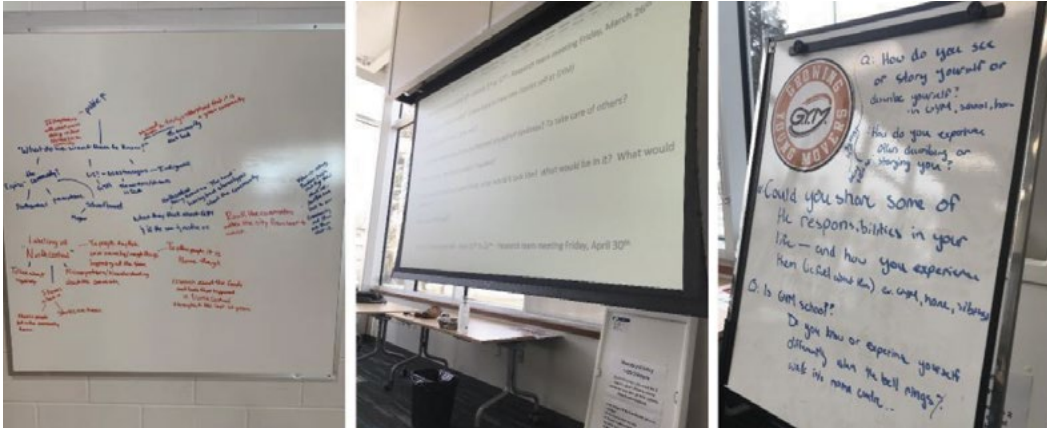


together with this intent. We shared stories and experiences of growing up in schools, our relation to physical activity/sport/after-school places, and leadership. As our research team shared, we drew annals, or chronicles, of our lives so we could each better get to know what stories we carried into the research project. As we did, we learned of positive stories and experiences in relation to school, moments of tensions in each other's lives, and how we each engaged with schools in the present. This allowed us to be more open and reflexive with each other as a research team while also understanding that our experiences of school, physical activity, and leadership would be different from the Indigenous youth we were beginning to work alongside given our privileges and social histories as a largely non-Indigenous research team.

*Reiterative and collaborative research conversation/interview planning and implementation:* Over the course of the research project our research team conducted four conversations (interviews) with each of the 10 Indigenous youth who were part of the study. Each conversation ranged in time from 30 minutes to two hours, and were digitally audio recorded and transcribed. Before each research conversation we gathered as a research team to map out what questions we may ask as we get to learn of the youth's experiences within the leadership pathway. For our first research conversation, we asked the youth to draw or create their own annals/chronicles of moments in their life so we could better understand the wholeness of their lives in relation to the pathway. The proceeding research conversations were each planned amongst the research team after each research team member completed their research conversations with one or two of the high school students. For example, after conversation Number 1 the research team gathered to talk about what was shared. From these conversations we collaboratively developed a range of questions to focus around for the next interview. After that interview was completed, we would gather again, discuss, and develop another set of questions to guide the next conversation. From these reiterative and collaborative processes we developed specific themes or focus areas for each of the four research conversations. Many of these themes developed out of listening to the high school students and us wanting to learn more of their experiences. While we write that we came to each research conversation with a focus, it should be noted that the research conversations were open to possibility and transformation as each researcher sat alongside each youth – in this way it could be named as an organic conversation that was not structured in rigid ways looking for answers.

As previously shared, research conversation Number 1 focused on asking the youth to create and share their own annals of their life. This was a visual and verbal sharing of key moments in their life that led to us meeting them in the leadership pathway. We began this way as we wanted to acknowledge, respect, and learn what knowledge/experience lived within the lives of the high school students we were getting to know. Research conversation Number 2 focused more specifically on questions and themes of how the high school students experienced school, physical education/activity, and leadership early in their lives. Research conversation Number 2 focused on the theme of how the youth experienced the transitions between school and GYM and if they experienced or knew themselves differently (i.e., as a leader) in each of these aspects of the pathway. Research conversation Number 3 focused on the theme of trying to attend deeper to how the high school youth felt at school and in GYM, and how they made meaning of their involvement in working within the GYM after-school program. In these conversations we were attempting to better listen to how they were negotiating their identities across the initiative. The final conversation focused on forward-looking stories of asking the Indigenous high school

students if there was anything they would change or imagine the school and leadership pathway becoming to make the initiative more respectful and relevant within their ongoing life-making. Below we have provided some photographs from some of our reiterative and collaborative research team processes that led to the development of guiding questions with our conversations.



Images of research team discussion

In addition to research conversations, several of our research team lived alongside the high school mentors in the GYM after-school program each week over the year. It is important to note that our research team did not just jump into research conversations wanting to “collect data.” We used the opportunity to play together within GYM to create, build, and sustain relationships so that when we sat down to converse, a relationship was present between researcher and participant. During this time, when health situations allowed, we would play with the high school mentors and children from the neighbouring schools within the after-school program. This living alongside was very important for many on our research team, such as Drs. Michael Dubnewick and Tristan Hopper, as it provided a connecting space for people from different places (i.e., University of Regina) to build relationships and get to know the high school students beyond a formal interview setting. Further, it allowed us to better understand how the high school students lived in these different parts (i.e., the more formal “school-hours” and curriculum and the less formal after-school hours) of the leadership pathway.

*Writing of individual narrative accounts:* After our research team lived alongside the high school mentors and engaged in several research conversations with each of the youth, we moved towards writing narrative accounts. In narrative inquiry, narrative accounts are a way of asking the researcher to give an account, or a representation, of the unfolding of lives of both the high school students as well as the research team as their lives become visible to each other. In narrative inquiry the writing of narrative accounts is a way to be accountable and responsible to those people we work with, in this case the Indigenous high school youth. These accounts ranged from 10 to 20+ pages of writing that formed a storied accounting of the lives of the high school students we got to know. Each of these accounts were written and developed in different ways depending on the depth of sharing/relationships that were developed. In addition to writing these accounts, each researcher shared the writings with the person they lived alongside as a way to develop mutuality and ask if we listened well. Once these narrative accounts were written and negotiated with the youth to a final draft, we came together as a research team to share across the accounts.

*Collaborative discussion and sharing of narrative accounts:* Once the accounts were complete, our research team met on two occasions. The first meeting occurred after each research team member wrote one of their narrative accounts. During this meeting we each sat and shared segments of the account, so we could begin to listen across the high school students' experiences within the leadership pathway. Our second meeting followed the same process, where we each shared our second accounts with each other as a way to hear across the ten high school students' experiences.

*Writing and identifying of threads/findings:* After sharing and negotiating the 10 narrative accounts of the Indigenous high school students who participated in the pathway, we read and listened for threads, or themes, across the accounts. As we began this research, we want to reiterate this research was not to tell people how the leadership pathway was effective in "developing" high school students; rather, our focus was to understand the experiences of Indigenous high school students in this initiative and moving towards a better understanding of how schools may better attend to the youths' lives. This led us to framing our findings as "pathways that Indigenous high school students asked us to consider."

# Pathways the Youth Asked Us to Consider: Findings

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What follows are threads that resonated across the accounts of the Indigenous high school students we worked alongside. These threads highlight pathways that the youth asked us to consider in terms of better understanding the leadership pathway at Scott Collegiate that works with GYM. These threads, or pathways, developed from reading and listening across the 10 Indigenous high school students. As we share each of these threads, we offer quotations and storied moments to animate the findings to offer the readers a glimpse into the youths' lives knowing these offerings are only a small portion of the many moments the youth asked us to consider.

The four pathways the youth asked us to consider are: (1) Pathways for identity making, (2) Pathways for play as educative, (3) Pathways for recognizing youth as knowledgeable, (4) Pathways for shifting trajectories collaboratively.

## Pathways for Identity Making

As we sat with the narrative accounts and our time alongside the high school students within the leadership pathway and GYM, we felt this constant pull in our work towards this notion of attending who the youth were and were becoming. Were we attending to their identity making; and were we doing this beyond the dominant identity labels that seemed to permeate how their lives were structured "as students," or for ourselves as "teachers" or "researchers?" As we listened to the high school students we lived alongside, we began to wonder how they were composing their identities beyond the label of "Indigenous student" and if they felt their identity negotiations were being supported within the leadership pathway. Below are some words from the high school students who are part of the leadership pathway that share how the initiative was a place where the youth began to story their identities in more sustaining ways –sometimes as a leader, sometimes as a teacher, sometimes as a brother or a role model.

# Conversations on Identity Making within the Youth Leader Pathway

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## *A conversation with Amy: "Follower to leader"*

**Researcher prompt:** Would you describe yourself as a leader in school, at home, or in the pathway?

**Response:** "Follower to a leader ... I guess, back then, my grandparents and my mom thought that I was going to be a follower. Right? Because I always fucked up through people I was following, I guess. And as I got older, that changed a lot. I don't know. I never used to call myself a leader until I joined Brian's class (i.e., leadership pathway). Because like ... I don't know. I'm just like, "I don't feel like leading," I guess. But when there's little kids that are looking up to you, I guess you consider yourself a leader."

## *A conversation with Brandon: "Older brother/teacher ... a leader now."*

**Researcher prompt:** "Would you describe yourself as a leader in school, at home, or in the leadership pathway?"

**Response:** "Older brother/teacher – as someone that's trying to help them and stuff ... as someone who wants to lead the kids by example, but someone who tries to be there for them too. That's how I think of myself."

**Researcher prompt:** "Would you ever have described yourself as a leader, or role model prior to beginning with the leadership pathway and Growing Young Movers?"

**Response:** With little hesitation "No, I did not ... before I wasn't really much of a leader, I would say. I would say I had trouble leading by example. For example, when I was 15, I had a bad swearing problem."

But now I learned how to not curse or anything when I get mad. That was a really good aspect to learn and really good skill to possess. So now I feel like I learned to be a better leader and just a better person myself just by being in GYM."

***A conversation with Devon: "I see myself as a teacher ... I am a mentor ... kinship"***

**Researcher prompt:** "Would you describe yourself as a leader in school, at home, or in the pathway?"

**Response:** "Anyone can be a teacher and teach somebody whether it's like in life or life skills, like how I like to think I am in GYM with badminton, I see myself as a teacher to my brother and family. A mentor is someone who is able to like guide and just be in the presence of someone who is like learning or growing, someone you can look up to and just there just a good influence on people. I am a mentor in GYM but also a mentor to my well family, I am a mentor to my peers. I really value family so that's why I think of myself as a mentor to them, kinship I think is a better word."

***A conversation with Kate: "GYM shows me that I am a good leader."***

**Researcher prompt:** Would you describe yourself as a leader in school, at home, or in the leadership pathway?

**Response:** "GYM [shows] me that I am a good leader, and that I am physically active because I am working with these kids physically ... to me, it'd feel like I'm teaching the class kind of."

**Researcher prompt:** "Do you feel like a leader in classes?"

**Response:** She doesn't see herself as a leader within the classroom at Scott. However, in GYM, she says, "But then when I'm with the kids and being a leader, they look up to me." She sees herself as a role model to the youth participants in GYM and she takes that responsibility very seriously. She states, "I feel like I'm being watched ... it's like they take in everything I do ..." (3, p.2) and she wants to be the best version of herself "... for the kids."

**Researcher prompt:** When I asked her about feeling like a role model and mentor and if she sees herself that way?

**Response:** "I don't know. Sometimes I see myself that way, but sometimes it's hard to think good on yourself. But at times I do."

I don't know. I don't know. I guess I do see myself like that. But I don't know really. I don't know ... I know that I kind of am. I know through other people

that people see me like that. But it's just that sometimes I don't. Deep down I know that I am. But it's hard to accept that I am, kind of thing ... It's just that not that I'm used to it. It's just that I didn't expect it from myself from a younger point of view for myself."

***A conversation with Liz: "An idol ... mostly in GYM."***

**Researcher prompt:** Would you describe yourself as a leader in school, at home, or in the leadership pathway?

**Response:** Without hesitation, she answered, "I think mostly in GYM ... because the kids, they look up to you as an idol, not just a mentor. Also, a friend who they get to play with."

***A conversation with Rochelle: "I want to be a good role model ... GYM has been a catalyst"***

**Researcher prompt:** Would you describe yourself as a leader in school, at home, or in the leadership pathway?

**Response:** "When I started working for GYM I didn't have any role models and stuff. I kind of didn't have that much hope for my future. I was kind of down at the time when I started GYM. And I was like ... I didn't have any role models or guides. When Brian started talking about being a role model to the kids I thought about my childhood. I was like – It would have been nice And even things I'm going through at this moment It would be nice to have a role model or somebody there just for support. Or somebody that understands. Or somebody that's just like – they don't have to ask me what's wrong, they'll just be there when I need them. It would be nice to have that.

"I thought about the kids at GYM. I thought about the way I grew up; I was thinking it would be nice. It probably means a lot to them when they have a role model to look up to – who is there for them – they can feel supported by and comfortable around. So I thought about that, and I was like, 'I want to be a good role model for them I want to be somebody who positively influences the community' It [GYM] has been a catalyst."

As we each sat down with the high school students who were part of the leadership pathway, one of the aspects they asked us to consider was how they experienced the school landscape as attending to their identity making. For many of the high school students we sat down with, they discussed traditional classroom places as places in which they did not have opportunities/space to compose identities as leaders, teachers, role models, and/or idols. In those places the discussion of content seemed to be the primary focus. As we listened to the youth, they directed us to the value of content being tied to the lived puzzles of negotiating their identities in relation to the content of leadership. As we asked the youth about their experiences within the leadership pathway, we began to notice that the high school students were discussing places in which they lived out the content of

leadership experientially and in relation. Given how the pathway was explicitly structured in practice, with the GYM after-school program, these pathways for the negotiating of their identities in the living were spoken to as valuable. And not just valuable in a way that the high school students better understood the content of classroom material, rather, valuable in that they could explore their identities in relation to leadership. As we lived alongside the high school students, we began to wonder if they could story their lives as teachers, role models, idols, kin if their lives were only alongside teachers and researchers in schools. We wonder if not for the little ones being alongside the high school students, would they have had spaces to re-story who they were on school landscapes outside the narratives of "Indigenous student." The pathway and the words of the youth show us the value of intergenerational and relational learning spaces for supporting different identities for high school students that let them live in school in different ways.

For many educators it would come as no surprise that high school students are negotiating and composing their identities within school places. What we want to highlight about the leadership pathway and our experiences in it are the need to be open and intentional as teachers and schools to supporting the complex identities of the people we are living alongside, and that the success of the initiative may have been less around teaching youth to be leaders (i.e., pushing an identity onto high school students) and more around coming alongside who they were becoming (i.e., living alongside and providing supportive experiential spaces for identity negotiations).

## Pathways for Play as Educative

It is well-recognized that movement, play, or physical activity has numerous benefits to people's lives, including students within schools (Lewis, 2018). While the benefits are well understood, what we want to highlight is the meaning of movement and play that the youth asked us to recognize. It was not uncommon as we sat down with the high school students who were part of the leadership pathway or played alongside them within GYM in after school times that the type of play we engaged with together was meaningful in their lives, and ours. The youth often storied how we moved and played together as an escape, a moment to live as a child, or an important stress relief within their lives. In many ways they asked us to think about the meaning of our movement and play together alongside some of the tensions they were experiencing in different parts of their lives. Again, we share some of their words to animate what we mean by play as educative.



# Conversations on play within the leader pathway

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*A conversation with Liz: "Play as fun ... don't feel sad."*

**Researcher prompt:** Tell me about how you play in GYM and the meaning of play in your life?

**Response:** "Even if they (i.e., children from surrounding schools) did have a bad day, they at least come to [GYM] for the program and then leave like happy and like all giddy, because they had fun ... Whenever I play with the little kids too, it's really fun, because they are there to play with you. And I feel like in my way, a bunch of serotonin all at once throughout the hours. Some things are funny, some things are kind of sad, too. Say something bad happened, obviously I'm going to feel really bad. But they get up real fast after a few minutes and start playing with the other kids, and I'm like, 'Yeah, you got this.' It brings a lot out of me, but it gives me a lot of energy as well ... I always enjoy seeing the kids, and I always feel like if I had a bad day at school or just a bad night, and I just forget about it and hang out with the kids. And sometimes I am sad, but I'm not usually sad at work anymore."

*A conversation with Brandon: "COVID's been tough ... miss that distraction of GYM/play"*

**Researcher prompt:** Tell me about how you play in GYM and the meaning of play in your life?

**Response:** We connect on FaceTime. "COVID's been so tough. I didn't really feel comfortable being at school because of COVID and how many people in my household have medical problems. It's been tough – We had that scare, a COVID case came into my household. Quarantine for 14 days. It was really terrible on my mental health. I got a little depressed having to be in my room alone really sucked for me. I really did not want to experience that again. I tried doing my work at home but that wasn't an option for me. I wish I didn't have to do it. I know I'm at risk of dying."

"I miss that feeling of being with the kids every day, because when I was with the kids, it helped a lot. You get to release a lot of stress doing the games and everything. Just seeing the kids, it's really a big distraction from life. It's been troubling not being in lately."

***A conversation with Rochelle: "GYM it's like a sacred space."***

**Researcher prompt:** Tell me about how you play in GYM and the meaning of play in your life?

**Response:** Is GYM different from school or physical education? ... "In physical education class when I was growing up, I didn't really want to participate and stuff because the other kids would ... it was kind of competitive ... when I was growing up in physical education, I was like is it that big of a deal that you have to pick on other kids in gym?" ... physical education is just moving around and stuff. Everybody can do it. Everybody has the right to physical education. It shouldn't be a competition for little kids, but I don't know what made them (i.e., [teachers]) think about it that way though." For Rochelle, GYM planted a different seed of movement than what she experienced in physical education classes growing up. Which she explained as the following, "I used to get bullied in physical education for not playing the games right. Or like, Oh, you're not good enough at that. It wasn't a good feeling. I'm glad that we have a place like GYM because nobody really ... nobody does that at GYM. They have a different experience and because of that different experience, it's going to help them grow in a different way, in a different avenue that I grew up in. I think from what happened, when I was in school, I kind of got a little bit insecure from that. It definitely was the seed to that kind of, when kids were bullying me. That's why I'm glad that GYM doesn't have that going on there. So it doesn't spread the seed and then they have to work harder to heal that part of themselves afterwards, when they're older. GYM. It's like a sacred space. I wish I had that when I was younger."

What we want to highlight about play as educative is two aspects. First is the overwhelming response we heard from many of the youth in the leadership pathway that being part of GYM and playing together with children allowed them to de-stress, feel happy, cope with significant life events, and be a kid again. The second point we want to highlight around what the youth asked us to consider in terms of GYM and play as educative was in terms of rethinking how play is structured. From the one account it is clear that how the youth played together, how GYM was structured, was less about building physical competencies and more about learning how to play together in good ways. As the one student remarked, being part of GYM and the leadership pathway was a different experience of movement and play, in a way that could be described as educative as it allowed for pathways into play that were not based in competence or skill but in care and respect.

## Pathways for Recognizing Youth as Knowledgeable

As teachers, educators, and researchers, one of the tensions we have often faced in our practice is around how students are positioned in schools as “needing to be taught” or without knowledge and we as educators are there to teach them. While we understand that schools are places where educators can and do share knowledge with younger generations, we also wonder if we can begin to question some of these narratives and recognize that high school students are knowledge holders. What follows are some quotes from our discussion with the high school students that show how the youth came to the leadership pathway full of knowledge of how to care for others and be leaders or mentors alongside.

# Conversations on Learning about the Youth's Knowledge within the Youth Leader Pathway

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*A conversation with Amy: "I started looking after my siblings at a young age."*

**Researcher prompt:** Tell me about the knowledge, or experiences, you draw on when working in GYM and being part of the Youth Leadership Pathway?

**Response:** "I started looking after my siblings and little cousins at a young age, I guess it just comes naturally to me. I see myself in a lot of them, I never had that," she noted during one of our earliest conversations. "I am up early every morning to make sure they are awake, have some breakfast, and go to school." To Amy, it was very important to her that she was able to care for the younger generations. She spoke often about making sure they got to school above all else. She also felt it important to make sure the young Growing Young Movers participants knew they were cared about.

*A conversation with Liz: "I just do it without thinking ... I always have this empathetic way"*

**Researcher prompt:** Tell me about the knowledge, or experiences, you draw on when working in GYM and being part of the Youth Leadership Pathway?

**Response:** "I remember this girl named Isabel. I'm pretty sure her grandma passed away. And I was told, Brian told me about it like quietly, because he pulled me aside, he showed me who it was, I knew her, but I didn't know her name. And then I was like, 'Oh, okay.' He was like, "I need you to like, maybe you and Rochelle and Amy could possibly like try and ask her if

you want, if she wants to play with you, if she doesn't, she can still do her own thing, but maybe try and involve her in playing right now. Because she looks like she's going through a lot, because her grandma passed away. I was like, 'Oh, okay.' Because I really felt that, because when I was little, I think around at the age of like probably like three to four, my mom passed away. She went on to describe "... I really connected with Isabel with that ... I just really felt what she felt, and it really hurt." She could really empathize with that little girl.

Throughout our conversations, she explicitly linked her sense of empathy with the loss of her mom. "I'm pretty sure it came from my mom ... I'm pretty sure it just came from the hardship of trying to grieve through my mom ..." It was clear that she empathizes naturally, it is not a forced effort: "I just do without thinking, because sometimes when I think about it, I don't know. I always have this empathetic way ..." (3, p.6). She also sees herself as a role model for these kids and wants to "... teach them the proper way to treat others how you want to be treated. " (2, p.2).

***A conversation with Trina: "kids ... they take that to heart ... I don't want them to feel like that either [excluded]"***

**Researcher prompt:** Tell me about the knowledge, or experiences, you draw on when working in GYM and being part of the Youth Leadership Pathway?

**Response:** Trina has helped me see how growing up with trauma has allowed for a level of empathy and compassion that some do not seem to possess. Her growing up within a home where addictions were present shaped her understanding of working with children and living as a leader in the community. This is exemplified in her words "Because you never know. Because some kids could be going through stuff like how I was, or something. And kids could have alcoholic parents or something, and they need a break, sometimes. So that [GYM] could also be a break for them ... I had a few nice people in my life. And then I also had some bad people in my life too. So I feel like it was both of them. I know how it feels like to be treated like shit, and then just to be excluded and stuff. So I know kids, especially, they take that to heart. And I don't want them to feel like that either. So why not be nice? And plus, too, it's probably going to be their first time seeing you too. So why don't you give a good impression of yourself?"

As we listened to each of the Indigenous high school youth one of the things that threaded across their lives was that they came to school and to the leadership pathway with knowledge and experience from their familial and community worlds. While we only share a couple responses here, many of the youth commented on how they learned to care, to empathize, to understand, to lead from their home worlds. Sometimes that was because situations at home asked them to care for siblings or family or negotiate precarious and tenuous situations.

As we sat down with each of the youth we attempted to listen deeper, and as we did, we learned more of how they negotiated numerous responsibilities in their lives that were complex, messy, and difficult to navigate. It was these experiences from familial and community worlds they often drew upon as knowledge holders within the pathway. In this way they asked us to think of our starting points in school curriculum in different ways and how that was structured in the leadership pathway. As stated before, the pathway was not conceptualized by teachers involved as a pathway to teach high school students to be leaders, rather, it was to come alongside their ongoing life-making as leaders, which was already being composed in other places outside the classroom. As educators it can be hard to slow down, listen, and acknowledge that the young people in high schools are knowledge holders. However, we see much value in recognizing the young people we live with in schools as knowledge holders, and not just people to be taught. In saying this we ask the reader to think with the words of one of the youth we work with:

*“Representing. I felt like I was trying to represent myself. Representing myself as a leader and role model. Was something I feel I did well this year. I know I can accomplish a lot more when I get the chance to.” As I reflect on Cole’s words of being able to represent himself, I linger in those final words – “when I get a chance to.” His words, as I read them now, asks me to consider the places in which the youth, like Cole, have the chance or possibility to share their strengths, to be seen/able to live as helpful.*

We end this thread with these words to consider how we can structure school places in ways that provide chances or opportunities for students to showcase their strength and knowledge. It became apparent to us that as the youth stepped into the GYM after-school aspect of the leadership pathway they experienced possibilities to share their strengths and knowledge of living as leaders, mentors, and/or guides for the children in the community. As we write this we wonder if this allowed the youth we lived alongside to sustain themselves more in school as they were positioned as knowledge holders and not just ones to be taught.

## Pathways for Shifting Trajectories Collaboratively

Part of our purpose to this research was to better understand the experiences of Indigenous high school students as they navigated the leadership pathway to better understand what shifts could be made within this initiative and possibly with other initiatives that work alongside Indigenous youth. We wanted to know how the initiative was storied as meaningful in their lives. As we listened, we drew on two threads of meaning that are based in shifting trajectories collaboratively. The first thread is based more in the shifts experienced at the individual level while they engaged in the pathway. For many of the youth in the pathway they spoke to the experience as meaningful to them as it put them on a different path where they may be able to live a different type of life than what they had seen before. Further, they also discussed how for those children involved in GYM, who they play with each week, this pathway initiative may even shift their trajectories as people as they mature through their lives – in this way there was a collaborative shifting as lives came together to wonder more hopeful futures.

# Conversations on Shifting Trajectories within the Youth Leader Pathway

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## *A conversation with Kate: "Not just jobs but in life ..."*

**Researcher prompt:** Since beginning GYM and the leadership pathway have you felt any shifts in who you may become?

**Response:** She speaks of proving (to) her family that she is capable, in spite of some of her sibling's harsh criticism. "They just don't think that I'll be able to finish on time. They just tell me 'We'll see you back,' and then they say some things that indicates they're trying to say that I'm not going to be able to graduate and stuff like that. "... while I'm in GYM in the leadership pathway, it's teaching me a lot. And the connection gives me opportunity to make money and the experience which I might need in the future. And then if we didn't have that, then I wouldn't have that experience. And that experience could help me with a lot because if I'm applying for those jobs then, or something like that, and that little one, that little experience right there if I didn't have that, I might not get the job. "Because in the future jobs, not just jobs but in life, I'm going to have to engage in talk to new people a lot. Like not just new people, but coworkers kind of so it's giving me the practice while working with other mentors to be able to ... try to come out of being shy. Not really shy, but yeah, that ... feeling that it's just hard to talk to other people, like just new people in general ... it's just practice for me for in the future for when I have to do that."

## *A conversation with Rochelle: "I want to ignite that spark"*

**Researcher prompt:** Since beginning GYM and the leadership pathway have you felt any shifts in who you may become?

**Response:** "I want to help ignite that spark so that they won't feel as

alone, or people won't compare themselves to other people. To know that they already have everything within themselves. They won't need to look outside of themselves for validation."

***A conversation with Liz: "It's for the kids ..."***

**Researcher prompt:** Since beginning GYM and the leadership pathway have you felt any shifts in who you may become?

**Response:** During one of our conversations, she described the time when she first told her dad about the opportunity to work with GYM. "He thought it was pretty cool. He was like, 'You get paid though?' and [she was] like 'Yeah, but it's for the kids.'" She went on to say "Whenever I think of telling anyone about that, it's mostly just like gaining experience with the kids" and "... it's not really for the money, for me, it's for just hanging out with the kids." When asked about what she gets from GYM, she said, "The thing I really take away ... is probably just having that sense of happiness of like being there for [the kids]" and "... whenever I go home, I usually go home with my own smile ... ."

In recollecting on the youth's words, we begin to share glimpses of how being part of GYM and the leadership pathway was part of their forward-looking stories of becoming different someone's and support children in the community to become different someone's. This aspect of shifting trajectories intergenerationally seemed to matter for many of the youth as they were attending not only to their own futures but to those around them. While we highlight these individual aspects of the youth attending to shifting their own and children's lives, they also talked about the shifts that occurred within the pathway at a larger, community level, as shown in the words below.

***A conversation with Amy: "People talk badly about North Central ... but this is where I live."***

**Researcher prompt:** Since beginning GYM and the leadership pathway, have you felt any shifts in your community?

**Response:** "I think people talk badly about North Central. But this is where I live with my grandma ... I am proud to wear my GYM stuff around here. The other day I saw a guy wearing his GYM backpack. I didn't know him or anything but thought 'Hey, that's cool.'"

We end this final thread with this note as a consideration to think about how important it was for many of the youth to see that what is happening in schools impacts their community worlds in positive ways. Amy's words highlight how meaningful it was for her to see an outward impact of what she was doing at school and within GYM/the leadership pathway within her community. To see backpacks with GYM logos mattered to her. To see shifts in her community mattered to her. That needed to occur alongside her own individual shifts as a person to sustain her.



It is words like these that ask us to think about those outward shifts that can and may happen when initiatives such as the leadership pathway and GYM actually engage with the community and make shifts within the community. When youth see changes for and with their community the meaning of school shifts for many of the youth.

## Pathways for Action

In finishing this research and report we feel that some takeaways are needed for teachers, schools, and those interested to better support the life-making of Indigenous high school students in schools. What we provide below is not a recipe for success but pathways that the youth asked us to consider, aspects they found meaningful and that sustained their lives within the leadership pathway, GYM, and Scott Collegiate. Our pathways for action include:

- Have aspects of the school curriculum directly integrated within and for the community so that students see, feel, and understand how they can shape their communities. And that their school experience cares about their community. The leadership pathway at Scott Collegiate is an example of an initiative that can and does do this given the relationship with GYM.
- Develop a network of intergenerational learning. The high school students we worked with appreciated having a connection to children in the community. They also discussed how meaningful and valuable it was for them to not only mentor children in their neighbourhood but also create intergenerational mentorship links in high school. For example, many began being part of GYM and the leadership pathway in Grade 10 and appreciated being mentored by Grade 12 students in the GYM program. This shift of not always having the “teachers teach” seemed to support a different dynamic for learning and community.
- Integrate paid employment within school. When we speak of youth being knowledgeable and sharing their knowledge with communities it is important that schools and school systems recognize what the youth offer. Recognition of this needs to happen through paid employment. This places value on what the high school mentors bring. It places and shows the value of supporting after-school places for children and youth in the community. Further, paid employment in high school supports the transition beyond high school as they learn to navigate worlds of employment and allows them to story themselves as more employable (through criteria such as work experience, SIN numbers, CPR/First Aid training certification, etc.).
- Considering transitions. Transitions are often discussed within schooling, from elementary to high school, from high school to the work force/university. One of the aspects we learned within this research was that pathways are relationally composed. We saw that with the children from neighbouring schools who played within the GYM program and alongside the leadership pathway student. Those children experienced Scott Collegiate in ways where they felt included, they knew teachers and people within the Scott Collegiate so that they belonged in that place even before their school lives transitioned there. For the youth mentors their experiences in GYM and the leadership pathway also created relational pathways where their experiences led to them working in summer recreation programs with the city and elsewhere.

Further, given the makeup of our research team, we slowly aimed to build relational connections between high school and university places/instructors. While our work is only a beginning to nurture these transitions based in relationships, we know more opportunities need to exist where youth and children have ongoing relationships while transitions occur so that when they step into a new school, navigate the workforce, or attend university, they may feel as if they belong before they get there.



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