

āhkamēyimowin (perseverance): walking together

Codesigned research project resulted in empowering First Nations girls

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To build a sense of empowerment among Indigenous youth, particularly First Nations girls, it is of utmost importance that they are included in the development of research and projects that are committed to achieving this goal. Using an empowering process and working closely with the girls of the Girl Power Program at Sturgeon Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan, who contributed equally to all research aspects, we designed a study that aimed at influencing positive changes among First Nations girls.

Context

The Cree word *āhkamēyimowin*—a term gifted by Knowledge Keeper at Sturgeon Lake First Nation and one of the Girl Power Program Co-Leads Ms Kingfisher—was a guiding principle for this study, which involved walking with the girls of the program to cocreate research within a transformative learning environment (TLE). Transformative learning environments are focused on strengths that build capacity through established relationships.¹ Facilitators of TLEs demonstrate the following traits: listening skills; trustworthiness; ability to incorporate sharing and reflection into the various research processes and to recognize people's readiness to learn; willingness to learn about the community and individual contexts; and a commitment to increasing the level of awareness and personal growth for those involved in the research processes.² Walking with the girls on this cocreated research journey facilitated mutual learning and an exploration of ways to identify and implement positive change through and with the sharing of stories.³

Sturgeon Lake First Nation

Sturgeon Lake First Nation, reserve number 101, is a signatory of Treaty 6 with the Crown.⁴ The community has an on-reserve population of approximately 2200 people, with approximately 700 adolescents and young adults between the ages of 11 and 25 residing on-reserve. The community has a long history of cocreating authentically engaged, community-driven research.⁵

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 trauma.⁶ It aims to break the cycles of trauma by empowering girls to

achieve their full potential through integrating Cree cultural teachings, ceremonies, and the rites of passage.⁶

Research questions

The following questions were cocreated with the Girl Power Program.

- What do the girls describe as empowering?
- What do the girls describe as roadblocks to empowerment?

Methods

The Girl Power Program participants, Knowledge Keepers, community members, and academic researchers who were engaged in all aspects of the research process comprised the research team for this participatory, community-driven research project. The community's description of *empowerment* (the recognition of one's self-identified strengths, abilities, and gifts) was used to guide the interpretation of the findings.

Participatory analysis² was undertaken to analyze the data, as it built upon the views and experiences of the girls, allowing for constant iterative feedback. It was important to ensure that the research was credible and a true representation of their experiences. Authentic engagement encouraged the girls' involvement in the various research processes of the project, which included translating the study's findings, writing the findings, and co-presenting at conferences.

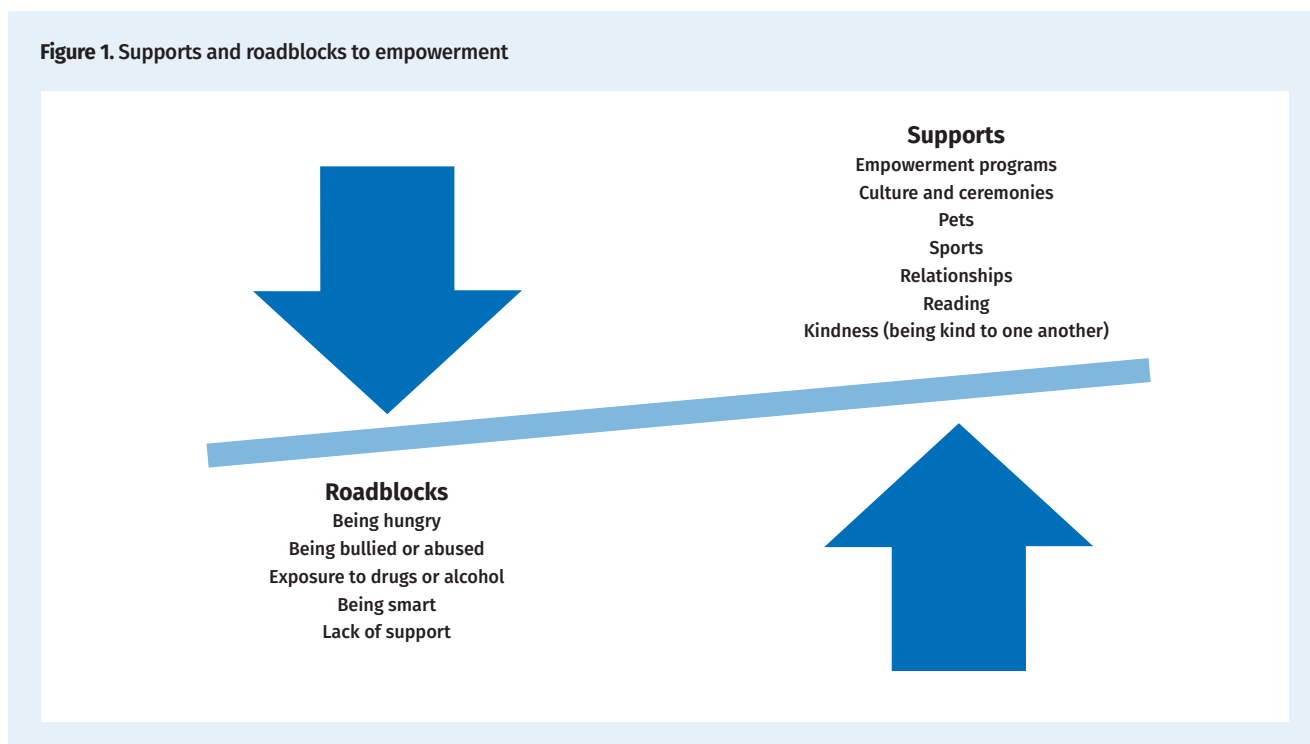
This project was grounded in community protocols and incorporated Cree ceremonies, such as the gifting of tobacco and cloth to Ms Kingfisher as an offering of respect and a way of honouring the Cree knowledge. Ethical approval was obtained from the community and a Certificate of Approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board was also received before proceeding with the project.

Findings

The participants in this study were girls between the ages of 10 and 15 who were participating in the Girl Power Program and were attending school at Sturgeon Lake Central School. Overall, 82% (18 of 22) of girls enrolled in the Girl Power Program participated in this project.

The participatory analysis revealed that the factors that influenced empowerment could be divided into 2 categories: supports and roadblocks (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Supports and roadblocks to empowerment



Reflections from the girls

Supports: When reflecting on the factors that support empowerment, the girls explained the following: Ms Thornton, who is one of the Co-Leads of the program, protected them from bullies and had snacks available in her room. Sports helped them to learn how to have fun. Pets were also identified as a support.

Roadblocks: The girls talked about their experiences with roadblocks more frequently than their experiences of support. In looking for solutions, the girls described strategies for walking around, over, or under the roadblocks using compassion and empathy. It was also evident that the girls addressed the roadblocks using a combination of knowledge from Indigenous and Western worldviews.

Discussion

Authentically engaging the First Nations girls optimized the findings from this project, as it was grounded in culture, their personal experiences, and a contemporary understanding of empowerment. The literature states that empowerment is best defined by local participants or communities that are engaged in all aspects of the research process, and that the definition of *empowerment* be grounded in the local culture.⁷⁻⁹ This research celebrated the strengths of all those involved and demonstrated the importance of relationships and their crucial role in co-developing and co-implementing research processes that were grounded in culture. Every aspect of the project was cocreated with First Nations girls, and this deepens the understanding of why TLEs were used

to demonstrate that empowerment based on authentic relationships is ever evolving.

This study demonstrated that the girls' roadblocks to empowerment were influenced by trauma. The girls had difficulty recognizing their gifts or experiencing empowerment because their spirits had been wounded. Indigenous healing models acknowledge the wounded identity and spirit of peoples and the need for cocreating spaces to learn about their spiritual and cultural transitions.¹⁰

Conclusion

Through authentic relationships and sharing of stories, TLEs can be co-developed not only for the health and well-being of First Nations girls, but also for the creation of practices that foster social change through *āhkamēyimowin* (perseverance) in and with the community. By being grounded in culture and by weaving together spiritual growth and healing, language, authentic relationships, trust, and honesty, this study was able to influence positive change within First Nations girls. 🍁

Ms Gaspar was a master's student in health sciences at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. **Ms Sundown** is Leader and Youth Peer Researcher at Sturgeon Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan. **Ms Kingfisher** is Knowledge Keeper and Co-Lead of the Girl Power Program at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. **Ms Thornton** is Co-Lead of the Girl Power Program at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. **Ms Bighead** is Health Director at Sturgeon Lake First Nation. **Girl Power Program participants of Sturgeon Lake First Nation** are involved in this program that supports First Nations girls. **Dr Graham** is a registered nurse, a psychologist, and Assistant Professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Saskatchewan. **Dr Ramsden** is a registered nurse and Professor and Director of the Research Division in the Department of Academic Family Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan.

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Contributors

Ms Gaspar, Ms Sundown, Ms Kingfisher, Ms Thornton, Ms Bighead, Girl Power Program participants (GPPPs), and Drs Graham and Ramsden were engaged in cocreating the research design, data collection, and analysis of the project. Each member participated in various processes and for various durations, given the nature of community-driven participatory research. **Ms Gaspar, Ms Sundown, Ms Kingfisher, Ms Thornton,** and **GPPPs** collected the data; **Ms Gaspar, Ms Sundown, Ms Kingfisher, Ms Thornton, GPPPs,** and **Drs Graham and Ramsden** engaged in data analysis and conceptualization of the project's findings. **Dr Ramsden** took the lead in manuscript writing and as a result the corresponding authors are **Ms Gaspar and Dr Ramsden**. All authors contributed to the writing of the manuscript, with **Ms Gaspar and Dr Ramsden** leading its iterative refinement. The final version of the manuscript was approved by all authors.

Competing interests

None declared

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