

**WÍCIHITOWIN: WORKING TOGETHER TO SUSTAIN WELLNESS
PROGRAMMERS IN NORTHERN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

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Abstract

Physical activity and wellness programs are vital for overall health. This is also the case in Canadian Northern Indigenous communities where programming can aid in addressing health disparities, foster cohesion, and preserve cultural practices. However, these programs often face sustainability challenges due to geographic isolation, economic constraints, and social barriers. This study explores the factors contributing to the long-term engagement and effectiveness of wellness and physical activity programmers in Montreal Lake Cree Nation. Rooted in my experience as a teacher and Health and Wellness Consultant within the community, I leverage my ongoing relationships and insider perspective to add additional context and comparisons to the research. The study aims to answer the key questions of: What factors contribute to the programmers long-term engagement and effectiveness? What barriers and facilitators sustain these individuals?

Using a descriptive qualitative study design, I worked with seven long-term programmers at the Montreal Lake Cree Nation Wellness Hub in Northern Saskatchewan. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, using the method of thematic analysis, the results provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences working in a Northern Indigenous Community, building relationships, and exploring their passions for physical activity and working with youth. Findings highlight the factors that sustain programmers and offer strategies for their retention and well-being. The overarching themes we identified showed us that a high level of personal passion and commitment is crucial to achieve long-term engagement and effectiveness in this setting. This passion was supported through consistent relationships and a feasible role which helped the programmers navigate, and ultimately overcome, many of the challenges and barriers that they faced. While focused on one specific community, the implications of this study are significant for other Northern Indigenous communities seeking sustainable wellness programs. This research contributes to the growing body of literature surrounding Indigenous wellness programs, workforce sustainability, and health promotion.

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Most importantly, I want to acknowledge my wife, Mckenna Hall, who has been beside me on every step of this journey as my work partner, grad school partner, and life partner. Without her constant support and positive outlook, this would not have been achievable for myself.

Contributions of Authors

The preparation and writing of this thesis was completed by Payton Hall. Supervision of the thesis and research was carried out by Dr. Lee Schaefer as the lead supervisor, and secondarily by supervisory committee member, Dr. Marta Erlandson.

Table of Contents

PERMISSION TO USE.....	I
ABSTRACT.....	II
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	III
CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS.....	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	V
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: MANUSCRIPT.....	16
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION.....	50
APPENDIX A.....	54
APPENDIX B.....	56
APPENDIX C.....	57
APPENDIX D.....	58
REFERENCES.....	63

Chapter 1: Introduction

Personal and Professional Context

My name is Payton Sayers Hall. I was given that name by my father—with the slightly unenthusiastic approval of my mother—on March 14, 1997, in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. I was born into a football-loving family and was appropriately named after Walter Payton and Gale Sayers: two NFL Hall of Fame running backs who played for the Chicago Bears. Though my ethnic roots can be linked back to Europe and Trinidad and Tobago, I like to identify myself as a proud Canadian and Saskatchewanian. I am well aware of the socioeconomic disparities that exist between people across the country, and I recognize that I was extremely blessed to have been born into a life where I had to face very few (if any) systemic barriers. I have two loving parents who have instilled Christian values in me since I was born. My parents did everything they could to allow me to pursue my dreams which allowed me to play professional football in the Canadian Football League in 2019 as well as graduate from the University of Saskatchewan in 2020 with a B.Ed after playing five years of U Sports Football with the Huskies. Even though my glory days in sports are done, the work ethic, life lessons, and connections I gained through the journey have instilled a passion for movement and physical activity that I hope to pass on to the next generation.

I currently live, work, and study on Treaty Six Territory: my home being the small community of Elk Ridge, my work location being Montreal Lake Cree Nation, and my study location a combination of both. Elk Ridge is a beautiful resort village located just outside the boundaries of Prince Albert National Park. I love this area, but I also recognize its history. Darwin Holmes (2020) stated, “Novice researchers should realize that, right from the very start

of the research process, that their positionality will affect their research” (p. 4) which is why I see the value in looking deeper into where I fit within the history of the area I now live.

Waskesiu and Elk Ridge have become a prestigious year-round vacation destination featuring high-end dining, luxury golf courses, and a variety of well-manicured outdoor activities. My home community of Elk Ridge contains very few full-time residents and is instead dominated by retired seasonal residents (snowbirds) and vacation homes and cottages. These factors played a significant role in my wife and I choosing to move to the area to begin our careers in Montreal Lake Cree Nation (MLCN) and later, purchasing our first home in Elk Ridge. Shortly after arriving in MLCN, I began to learn about the history of the area through conversations with colleagues and community members. I learned that many Woodland Cree families were forcibly displaced from their homelands and traditional hunting grounds along Waskesiu, Kingsmere, and Crean Lakes and forced to move elsewhere due to colonial desires; most opting to move up-river to Montreal and Weyakwin Lakes. Now, each time I enter the National Park I am reminded that many Indigenous people¹ had suffered to build the park that I now get to live beside and enjoy. I am also reminded of this colonial injustice every day when I commute to work, leaving behind my upper-middle-class community to travel 25 minutes to MLCN where many of my students and colleagues still live in extreme poverty and unsafe housing.

Despite being non-Indigenous, my entire professional career thus far has involved working directing in First Nation communities. I—along with my wife, Mckenna—originally came to Montreal Lake to work as a Health and Wellness Consultant for an organization called Ever Active Schools (EAS). After two and a half years of employment with EAS, we eventually

¹ Throughout this paper I will be using the term Indigenous as much as possible, but may also use terms such as Aboriginal or Indian when referencing organization names and direct quotations.

transitioned to working directly for MLCN within the school. Before coming to MLCN, I taught for one year on Kahkewistahaw First Nation as a middle years and high school teacher. Through my work as a teacher and wellness programmer, I became interested in providing unique wellness opportunities to Indigenous youth, leading me to pursue a Master's degree in a related field. Indigenous researcher Margaret Kovach (2021) stated, "Passion and purpose combined are strong motivators for the daunting research journey" (p. 139) which is why I feel so comfortable with this endeavor yet still accepting of the uncertainty of where it might take me.

One thing that constantly lingers over my head is the fact that I am a non-Indigenous person who works directly with, and technically for, Indigenous peoples in their community. I find myself thinking: Should I be here? Is this my role? Is my opinion wanted about this? I understand that trust is a crucial part of any relationship, but I am constantly reminded that despite my best efforts, the trust of certain people may be difficult to earn due to the colonial history of our country. Despite some of the headlines you may see, reconciliation isn't always glamorous; often it feels like a never-ending task that requires meaningful effort and engagement. But if there is one thing I have learned from my Indigenous friends, colleagues, and students, it's that a resilient person can overcome even the toughest of challenges. Regardless of where my professional path takes me, I am confident that promoting sport and wellness to Indigenous youth will always be a notable chapter in my story. This strong connection to this work that eventually led me to undertaking this study.

When I first arrived in Montreal Lake Cree Nation in August of 2021, I really had no idea of the background context to some of the wellness work that had begun in the community. All I knew was that Montreal Lake had formed a partnership with EAS—my new employer who I admittedly did not know much about—and my job was to show up to the school, start building

relationships, and see where I could be of service. It wasn't long after arriving that I began to learn about some of the background pieces that were happening to secure funding for the school and community, spearheaded by Dr. Sean Lessard and Dr. Lee Schaefer. Over time I began to form a relationship with them, as well as the other members of the Wellness Hub team, which opened my eyes to the bigger picture and some of the research potential that existed. Not long after, I reached out to Dr. Lessard by email indicating that I was interested in pursuing a Master's degree and asking him to let me know if there were ever any funding opportunities that came up to support the work happening in Montreal Lake. Later that day I received a reply from Dr. Lessard that read, "Yes !!!!! We just received major funding yes!!!!!" which was the first step in a new path for my life.

The aforementioned funding Dr. Lessard was referring to was a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant that Dr. Schaefer and Dr. Lessard had just been awarded, known as the *Mitho Miskawawin: Moving Well Together Partnership*. The purpose of the project was to enhance Indigenous sport and physical activity opportunities by removing barriers and creating meaningful partnerships. This research project was truly the perfect match for myself as it was a combination of so many aspects of my past and present life. First, the research was to be taking place in Montreal Lake: the community that I was already working in. Secondly, Ever Active Schools (my past employer) was already aware of the project and had agreed to be a partner organization to the research team. Lastly, the University of Saskatchewan Huskies (Huskie Athletics) were another partner in the project which created the perfect match given my recent history as a Huskie athlete. Together, these factors all contributed to my decision to begin graduate studies and specifically research the experience of wellness programmers in Montreal Lake.

Research Purpose

This Master's research study aims to gain a better understanding of the unique approach MLCN is taking to support their youth through wellness programming and the formation of the Wellness Hub. As someone who was able to not only witness the program but also participate in it, I became interested in learning more, specifically relating to the programmers that I had begun to form relationships with and what drew them to this opportunity. Building on that, I was also interested on what had motivated them to stay engaged over the years; something that I had noticed is uncommon in the Indigenous communities I had worked in where high turnover occurred each year. This curiosity led me to explore literature surrounding colonialism, health disparities, wellness programming, workplace challenges, and relationships. From my own experience and the literature, my main research focus on the question: *how can we make wellness programming in Northern Indigenous Communities sustainable for the professionals that offer it as well as the communities that desire it?* Although these questions don't directly take on a de-colonizing approach, given the historical context in Canada, and the fact that my work takes place within an Indigenous community, it is important to begin with a brief understanding of the enduring impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples and communities.

Literature Review

Colonialism in Canada

Colonialism is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically (Czyzewski, 2011). The effects of colonialism and colonial driven assimilation policies, such as the Indian Act and residential schools, have had a clear and negative impact on the health and wellbeing of

Indigenous peoples in Canada causing intergenerational harm and trauma (Health Council of Canada, 2005; Adelson, 2005; Wilk et al., 2017). These effects are both historical and enduring and include physical and emotional harm to children, lower educational attainment, loss of culture and language, and disconnect of family structures (Wilk et al., 2017). Due to this, it is well established that Indigenous peoples in Canada experience a disproportionate burden of poor health outcomes compared to the non-Indigenous population (Adelson, 2005). This disastrous result is far from surprising when critically examining the history of Canada's assimilatory policies, including residential schools. The residential school system was intended to *kill the Indian and save the man* by destroying traditional language, culture, and spiritual beliefs in order to assimilate Indigenous children into Canadian society (Kirmayer et al., 2003; Bombay et al. 2014; Wilk et al., 2017). After being forcibly taken from their families and homes, children were often the victims of psychological, sexual, physical, and spiritual abuse while also experiencing poor living conditions and inadequate nutrition (Corrado and Cohen, 2003). This situation has now evolved into enduring negative health effects such as physical health complications, substance use, high rates of mortality/suicide, crime, and a lack of family/community structure (Corrado and Cohen, 2003). The resulting historical trauma is clear evidence of the transgenerational effects of residential schools in Canada and shows how traumatic events endured by communities negatively impact individual lives in ways that create significant issues for residential schools survivors as well as their descendants (Kirmayer et al., 2014).

Colonialism in Research

The effects of colonialism are also apparent in academia where for many centuries, Indigenous people around the world have suffered from unethical research practices and deficit theorizing through research (Kovach, 2021). Research involving Indigenous peoples has been

undertaken in isolation by the colonizing group which is often Eurocentric researchers working at universities that have, intentionally or unintentionally, devalued Indigenous ways of knowing and doing (Hart et al., 2017). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) famously stated, “the word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1). Simply put, Indigenous research has long been for the benefit of the researchers and not the people being researched (Bishop, 1998). It has been done from the outside, by the outside which has diminished the self-determination of the community being studied (L.T. Smith, 2021). These factors have created a phenomenon known as ‘helicopter research’, where researchers come into a community without prior relationships, get the data they need, and exit with little regard for the community and people being studied (Bharadwaj, 2014; Campbell, 2014). This history has created an undeniable, yet perfectly understandable, distrust between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous researchers.

As a response to this, the First Nations Information Governance Committee (FNIGC), in collaboration with Indigenous communities, developed the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP). OCAP puts the idea of *who* into the spotlight. While existing ethical guidelines encourage better representation in the research process, OCAP challenges the fundamental principles of research and the ability of the traditional gatekeepers (academic peer review committees, funding agencies) who evaluate Indigenous research by giving them new criteria to consider for what gets funded and published (Schnarch, 2004). **Ownership** means that the Indigenous group holds the rights to their cultural knowledge, data, and information just as an individual person owns the right to their personal information (Schnarch, 2004). **Control** ensures that Indigenous people remain the decision makers for all aspects of the research and information management process that impacts them (Schnarch, 2004). **Access** relates to the

information that has been gathered on Indigenous peoples and communities and gives them the right to request it at any time as well as the decision of whom it is shared with (Schnarch, 2004). Lastly, **Possession** ensures that data gathered remains in a safe, trusting location and always gives the community the right to re-evaluate the situation if circumstances change (Schnarch, 2004). These principles aim to address the historical imbalances and unethical practices that have characterized research involving Indigenous communities, and to promote Indigenous self-determination, cultural revitalization, and community development (Schnarch, 2004); a direct response to the unethical and unjust research done on Indigenous populations. Unfortunately, there are also a number of other inequities that exist for Indigenous peoples in Canada outside of academia.

Health Inequities and Social Determinants of Health

The Social Determinants of Health are a group of social, environmental, and economic factors that determine individual and population health (Government of Canada, 2023). A deeper look, with caution to avoid deficit theorizing—into the Social Determinants of Health, reveals that Indigenous peoples face much higher rates of almost every negative aspect of health such as chronic disease, obesity, mental health issues, and shorter life expectancy, when compared to Canada’s non-Indigenous population (Kolahdooz et al., 2015; King, 2011; Young, 2003). The risk factors that Indigenous people are facing have developed due to the complex history of colonization, oppression, marginalization, and harmful treatment of Indigenous People throughout Canada’s past (Snowshoe et al., 2017). The colonial policies of past and present are the root cause of these issues and efforts to address them will only be partially successful until there are drastic changes that allow Indigenous autonomy and self-sufficiency (Smylie and Firestone, 2016).

Along with education, wellness and physical activity programs and promotion have been identified as meaningful ways to address some of the aforementioned health concerns (Giles and Darroch, 2014; Lavallée and Lévesque, 2013; Warburton and Bredin, 2019). The importance of wellness programming is also identified in many of the recommendations made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in their Calls to Action.

As part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement—the largest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history—the TRC was formed to facilitate reconciliation among residential school survivors, their families, their communities, and all Canadians (Government of Canada, 2021). In 2015, the TRC published a list of 94 calls to action that are intended to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation in Canada (TRC, 2015). Within the 96 calls to action a broad span of reconciliatory areas are addressed which look across church apologies, child welfare, justice system, sovereignty, and many others. Areas surrounding education and health are also prominent within the calls to action. This study specifically addresses call to action #66 which relates to community-based youth programming as well as call to action #89 which encourages physical activity promotion and removal of barriers to good wellbeing (TRC, 2015).

Wellness Programming

As we know, physical activity plays an important role in the maintenance and promotion of good health in all people (Poitras et al., 2016; Young, 2007). Thinking slightly more broadly, wellness programming is a holistic term that describes activities that promote physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental wellbeing. Programming can range from sports teams, cultural groups and clubs, festivals and camps, and much more, but almost always features adult programmers organizing and leading activities for youth. According to the Aboriginal Sport

Circle, the national body for sport and recreation development in Canada, sport and recreation are a powerful medicine that has the power to heal many of the social ills facing Indigenous peoples and foster community healing (ASC, n.d.; Hanna, 2009). Given the significant health inequities experienced by Indigenous peoples—caused by colonialism and intergenerational trauma—designing and delivering wellness programs that are culturally safe for all Indigenous peoples is of key importance (Giles and Darroch, 2014). A connection to the land is another important aspect to wellness programming as it is proven to promote positive outcomes for youth and help promote a positive connection to culture (Crooks et al., 2015). Modern interpretations of many of Canada’s treaties—specifically Treaties 6 which includes a medicine chest clause—argue that physical activity and wellness programming should be considered a right due to its importance to wholistic health (Lavallée and Lévesque, 2013; Haslip, 2001). While there have been a variety of theoretical frameworks used to frame Indigenous youth programming, due to its’ strength based approach, positive youth development— an approach that recognizes the strengths of youth and the communities in which they live (Schulman and Davies, 2007)—came up consistently throughout my literature review.

Bruner et al., (2016) conducted the first systematic review of studies that used positive youth development as a framework to explore Indigenous youth development in sport and physical activity which uncovered a variety of themes that prove the benefits of wellness programming while also confirming some of the existing barriers caused by historical events and policy. Bruner and colleagues found that physical activity and sport provides many positive opportunities for Indigenous youth to thrive such as learning about Indigenous values and traditions, strengthening resiliency, improving wholistic health, and promoting culture and education (Bruner et al., 2016). Some of the barriers he found were common themes such as

racism, bullying, and exclusion (Bruner et al., 2016). While the systematic review provided some clear ways forward based on the studies analyzed, the authors noted that more qualitative research in the area is needed utilizing a variety of methods to help us better understand the experiences of Indigenous youth within contextual and unique programs.

“Effective [wellness] programs are characterized by vision and leadership, holism, active community participation, strengths-based orientation, and reinvigoration and revitalization of Aboriginal cultures aimed at realizing self-determination” (Greenwood et al., 2012, p. 383). They must be unique and based in the local culture of the community in order to be successful and relevant (Blodgett et al., 2008; Hudson et al., 2020; Schaefer and Wasyliv, 2018). Part of this is ensuring they are leveraging local strengths and human resources as assets to create a sustainable environment that promotes positive health outcomes and reduces negative health outcomes in the youth (Crooks et al., 2010). Despite the promises of wellness programming for Indigenous youth, many challenges have been identified when examining the feasibility of programs and their long-term impact, some of which relate to the programmers and teachers that are tasked with delivering them (Klinck et al. 2005; Crooks et al., 2010; Blodgett et al., 2008; Hudson et al., 2020).

Barriers and Workplace Challenges

²While both teachers and community programmers have unique duties and roles, they interact with youth in a similar fashion. Often times, these professionals must also wear both hats due to limited staffing in their locations. Teaching is often easier to compare across locations because it is a more standardized and regulated profession. In remote Indigenous communities, schools act as a hub for both education and youth programming which are crucial aspects of

² For this section, teachers and community programmers can be looked at interchangeably.

developing a healthy population. One of the major challenges that remote schools face is a constant struggle with staffing: both hiring new staff and retaining current staff. For instance, according to Mueller and Carr-Stewart (2011), recruiting and retaining quality teachers is one of the most important links to student achievement and program success in Federally-funded Indigenous schools. Challenges in recruiting suitable adult community mentors have also been noted by both researchers and program developers (Klinck et al., 2005). “The failure to fund First Nations educational system(s) has left First Nations schools unable to provide supportive second level services similar to the array of services established in provincial school boards/divisions” (Carr-Stewart et al., 2011, p. 364). This has led to Federally-funded Indigenous schools becoming a much less attractive place to work when compared to provincially funded schools given their problematic working conditions, lack of student supports, and very limited professional support networks (Monk, 2007). Teachers that work in Northern Indigenous schools³ are often a long way from their homes and families which adds to the feeling of isolation, and has forced schools to offer incentives to try to attract people (Monk, 2007). Adding to this is the policies that many First Nation schools operate under which are not supportive of long-term employment; one-year contracts (without the protection of a union) are almost standard practice across First Nation schools which creates extremely high turn-over rates every year (Monk, 2007). Due to these factors, First Nation schools are often viewed as a temporary stop for teachers while they work to find longer-term employment closer to a larger community.

Though not all community programmers are teachers, many teachers also take on the role of programmers outside of their classrooms which can create an added layer of complexity. In

³ Northern Indigenous community is used to be inclusive of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit settlements. I was also advised by community leaders that the term “reserve” is often deficit based and thus should be avoided if possible.

most Northern First Nation schools, only a small handful of teachers are also community members with majority coming from different communities or a non-Indigenous backgrounds. There are well documented challenges around cultural struggles that many non-Indigenous teachers, as well as teachers from a different community/cultural background, face when working in remote First Nation schools (Oskineegish, 2015). As outsiders to the community, many teachers feel that it is not their place to try to change the status-quo due to fear of stepping on someone's toes or offending the wrong person which could lead to their contracts not being renewed (Oskineegish, 2015). Many non-Indigenous teachers are also sensitive to the history of residential schools in Canada and feel it may not be their place to take the lead on programs for Indigenous youth. This creates a revolving door of teachers and programmers that continues to stall significant progress and therefore limits the sustainability of programs (Mueller et al., 2011). Constant staff turnover also hinders one of the most important aspects of effective work in Indigenous communities: a trusting relationship.

Relationships and Trust in Programming

Developing strong relationships when working in Indigenous communities can not be stressed enough and has been well documented in the literature (McHugh et al. 2019; Kolehdooz et al., 2015; Dubnewick et al. 2019). McHugh et al. (2019) conducted a meta-study of qualitative research focusing on the sport and recreation experiences of Indigenous youth and concluded that their relationship to community (family, coaches, school, role models) played a major role in having a positive experience with sport. A similar result was found relating to program success in Indigenous communities; with the authors reporting that the success and sustainability of sport programs can be enhanced when they originate, and are guided, by community needs and wants which can only be known by taking a relational approach to planning and execution (Giles &

Lynch, 2012). In a narrative inquiry on relational ethics in recreation programs, Dubnewick et al. (2019) said,

“Thus, when we come to the question of what does it mean to live in relationally ethical ways as a recreation practitioner, our direction shifts towards the relationships between people, and the responsiveness that occurs in these encounters as two or more lives come together in the meeting place of a recreation program” (p. 638).

This conclusion is not unique to Indigenous youth; it can easily be argued that any form of learning, teaching, and doing is enhanced by a positive relationship between the people involved. Landertinger et al. (2021) wrote, “Collaboration and long-term partnerships between universities, Indigenous organizations, education authorities, and community partners are essential” when speaking to the time needed to develop positive relationships so programming and research can happen in a good way (p. 48). With that said, positive interactions, communication, and sharing of knowledge are all ways to build a positive relationship with Indigenous communities and youth. Programmers are the backbone of any successful youth sport or activity; without them, there would be no hope of long-term sustainability. In order to support programmer retention and prevent burn out, it is important to focus on the relational side of the work, including with their employer, colleagues, and participants.

Gaps in Literature

From the literature we know that people are an extremely important aspect of programs and providing youth with wellness opportunities. Along with other gaps, Kolahdooz et al., (2015) specifically noted that there is a scarcity of research regarding the barriers to, and opportunities for, education among Indigenous populations which directly relates to the people

that offer said education/activities. Successful recurring programming has been difficult to study due to the *come and go* nature of many programs that take place in isolated Northern communities. While there have been some studies that have looked at the programs themselves, very little data has been collected examining the experiences of the people who offer programming in these challenging, often under-resourced locations. This brings up questions about sustainability and what conditions need to be met in order to make this work feasible for the long-term. Along with that, it is important to look at how programmer experiences differ in isolated communities as opposed to urban centres where similar studies have already been conducted (Mason et al., 2019; Kerpan and Humbert, 2015; Schaefer et al., 2017). Kolahdooz et al., (2015) also recommended further research on strategies for overcoming educational barriers in diverse educational settings, as well as the long-term effects of health education through culturally-specific approaches.

Chapter 2

WĪCIHITOWIN: WORKING TOGETHER TO SUSTAIN WELLNESS PROGRAMMERS IN NORTHERN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Background

“I think that the only way you see change with kids is if you see people, really dynamic people, stay for a longer period of time” (Adam, 15:46).

“Because you come one time, that doesn’t mean anything, right? But when you keep coming back, that’s where you build the trust” (Leo, 06:03).

Existing literature highlights the challenges and successes of physical activity and wellness programs in various contexts but often overlooks the unique conditions and needs of the people that are tasked with delivering programs in Northern Indigenous communities. Physical activity and wellness are essential for overall health, playing a crucial role in preventing chronic diseases, improving mental health, and enhancing quality of life. For Canadian Northern Indigenous communities, these programs are particularly important as they address specific health disparities, foster community cohesion, and preserve cultural practices (Blodgett et al., 2008; Crooks et al., 2015; Giles and Darroch, 2014; Hudson et al., 2020; Lavallée and Lévesque, 2013; Warburton and Bredin, 2019). However, ensuring the sustainability of physical activity and wellness programs in these communities presents unique challenges. Geographic isolation, economic constraints, and social barriers often impact the longevity and effectiveness of such initiatives (Monk, 2007). At the same time, the resilience and self-determination of Indigenous

communities can be leveraged to explore new opportunities and strategies for success. As part of the "mitho waskiwiwin: Moving Well Together Partnership—a Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) project with the goal of enhancing facilitators and removing barriers to physical activity in Montreal Lake Cree Nation (MLCN)—this study aims to explore the sustainability of a group of individuals who facilitate a wellness program in MLCN, a Northern Indigenous community, examining the factors that contribute to their ongoing engagement and identifying strategies to support their retention.

My interest in this research stems from my own experiences working as a teacher, as well as a Health and Wellness Consultant in MLCN. As I watched programmers and teachers come and go, I began to wonder about Adam's words that opened this paper, the people who stayed and what sustained these individuals. My interest was one aspect that shaped this study; however, through conversations with community leaders it became clear that they were also interested in better understanding how they might better support both teachers and programmers in their community. The specific questions that drove this study were fostered by these co-composed wonders: What factors contribute to the long-term engagement and effectiveness of these wellness programmers? What are the common barriers and facilitators that sustain these individuals? – Broadly speaking, what keeps them coming back?

A descriptive qualitative study design offered the opportunity to work closely with seven wellness and physical activity programmers who have been engaged for over three years with the Wellness Hub in MLCN. MLCN is a Woodland Cree community located in Northern Saskatchewan. The Nation is spread between two reserves, Montreal Lake 106B and Little Red River 106B, and consists of approximately 4000 members. The Wellness Hub, focused around physical activity and wellness activities, was formed as a way of coordinating the efforts of the

various professionals who were engaged in programming in the community. Through regular meetings and ongoing collaboration, the group was able to work together and leverage each other's skills and schedules to support the overall goal of promoting wellness for the youth. The group's marquee offering, referred to as *wellness camps*, were multi-day programs that took place throughout the year. While each camp activity plan changed based on youth and community input, the normal routine consisted of approximately five hours per day of wellness activities (physical, land-based) as well as a breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snack. While physical activity and being on the land are important aspects of the program, these activities are in a sense the vehicles that allow programmers to connect with youth and community through movement.

I utilized current literature, as well as my own experiences and community input, to co-create a semi-structured interview guide⁴ that would help to garner insights from long-term engaged professionals. I also had the opportunity to observe and even participate in the program on multiple occasions. I then used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the programmers, but also to provide a level of reflexivity that allowed me to include my own observations in a meaningful way. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the complex factors at play and ensured that the voices of the programmers are central to the findings.

While this study is contextual in the sense that it is focused around one group of programmers in one program in MLCN, given the common material realities of Northern Indigenous communities⁵ (geographic isolation, economic constraints, social barriers) it is my

⁴ A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A

⁵ The term Northern Indigenous community is used instead of reserve due to community recommendation. The term is also more inclusive of other Indigenous settlements that are not designated as First Nation reserves.

hope that this research will be significant to other communities who have a desire to implement wellness and physical activity programming in sustainable ways. Furthermore, I see this study contributing to the body of literature that looks at workforce sustainability and health promotion in community settings, specifically isolated communities. Lastly, this research is part of a larger project that brings attention to the importance of cultural sensitivity, and community driven approaches that focus around self-determination and knowledge translation that is meaningful to communities engaged in the research.

This paper is organized as follows: The first section reviews relevant literature on the sustainability of physical activity and wellness program facilitators and Indigenous health. The second section describes the methodology, including data collection and analysis techniques. The third section presents the combined results and discussion. The final section provides the conclusion and implications of these findings for policy, practice, and future research.

Literature Review

Colonialism

While there are entire books written around colonialism in Canada, given that this study takes place in a Canadian Northern Indigenous community, it is important to at least provide a brief understanding of the complex history of Canada. Colonialism and assimilation policies, like the Indian Act and residential schools, have caused intergenerational harm and trauma to Indigenous peoples in Canada (Health Council of Canada, 2005; Adelson, 2005; Wilk et al., 2017). Given that this study was shaped by a programming and research partnership, it is important to be mindful of the role colonialism has played in research *on* Indigenous peoples. Colonialism has also impacted the way Indigenous peoples view academic research as Indigenous communities have long faced unethical research practices, deficit theorizing, and colonial extraction (Kovach, 2021). Eurocentric researchers often conducted isolated studies that

devalued Indigenous knowledge and undermined community self-determination (Hart et al., 2017; Bishop, 1998; L.T. Smith, 2021). This "helicopter research" approach—entering communities solely to gather data and leaving without regard for the people—has fostered distrust between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous researchers (Bharadwaj, 2014; Campbell, 2014). I was mindful of the negative impacts of this past research and was supported by the larger project grant and team that is focused around culturally responsive, relational community-based research practices (Hart et al., 2017).

Due to colonization, oppression, and marginalization, Indigenous people in Canada face higher rates of negative health outcomes compared to non-Indigenous populations (Adelson, 2005; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; King, 2011; Young, 2003; Snowshoe et al., 2017). These social, environmental, and economic factors, known as the Social Determinants of Health, have a strong correlation to a person's health and quality-of-life (Government of Canada, 2023). The resulting trauma caused by colonialism has led to enduring negative health effects, including physical health issues, substance abuse, higher mortality and suicide rates, crime, and weakened family and community structures (Corrado and Cohen, 2003; Kirmayer et al., 2014). Addressing these issues requires drastic changes to allow Indigenous autonomy and self-sufficiency (Smylie & Firestone, 2016). Education, wellness, and physical activity programs have been identified as effective in addressing health concerns (Giles & Darroch, 2014; Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013; Warburton & Bredin, 2019). This aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action #66 and #89, which advocates for community-based youth programming and the promotion of physical activity (TRC, 2015).

Wellness Programming

Physical activity is crucial for maintaining and promoting good health (Young, 2007). Wellness programming, which includes physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental wellbeing activities, is essential. According to the Aboriginal Sport Circle, sport and recreation can heal social ills and foster community healing (ASC, n.d.; Hanna, 2009). Given the health inequities experienced by Indigenous peoples due to colonialism and intergenerational trauma, culturally safe wellness programs are vital (Giles & Darroch, 2014). Connection to the land also promotes positive outcomes and cultural connections for youth (Crooks et al., 2015). Some argue that physical activity and wellness programs should be considered a right, based on modern interpretations of Treaties like Treaty 6, which includes a medicine chest clause (Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013; Haslip, 2001). Positive youth development, a strength-based approach that recognizes the strengths of youth and the communities in which they live, is a commonly used and researched framework for Indigenous youth programming (Schulman and Davies, 2007).

Bruner et al. (2016) conducted the first systematic review of positive youth development in Aboriginal physical activity. They identified themes proving the benefits of wellness programs, such as learning Indigenous values, strengthening resiliency, improving holistic health, and promoting culture and education. They also highlighted barriers to physical activity participation such as racism, bullying, and exclusion. While the review suggested clear paths forward, the authors emphasized the need for more qualitative research to better understand programs that engage Indigenous youth in wellness activities.

Effective wellness programs for Indigenous communities are defined by vision, leadership, holism, active community participation, a strengths-based approach, and cultural revitalization for self-determination (Greenwood et al., 2012). They must be unique and locally grounded to be successful (Blodgett et al., 2008; Hudson et al., 2020; Schaefer & Wasyliv,

2018). Leveraging local strengths and resources is crucial for creating a sustainable, health-promoting environment (Crooks et al., 2010). However, challenges remain in program feasibility and long-term impact, often related to the educators and programmers involved (Klinck et al., 2005; Crooks et al., 2010; Blodgett et al., 2008; Hudson et al., 2020).

Wellness Programmers: Challenges and Barriers

Having established there is a need for wellness programming for youth in Indigenous communities, as well as factors that make these programs effective, I now turn to how important the individuals are who facilitate these programs. Teachers and community programmers interact similarly with youth, though teaching is more standardized and regulated. In remote communities, schools serve as hubs for education and youth programming, essential for developing a healthy population. However, these schools face significant staffing challenges in hiring and retaining staff. Recruiting quality teachers is crucial for student achievement and program success in Northern Indigenous schools (Mueller & Carr-Stewart, 2011). Similar recruitment issues exist for adult community mentors outside of schools (Klinck et al., 2005). Underfunding of First Nations educational systems has left Indigenous schools lacking supportive services, making them less attractive workplaces compared to provincially funded schools (Carr-Stewart et al., 2011; Monk, 2007). Teachers in Northern Indigenous schools often experience isolation and work under one-year contracts without union protection, leading to high turnover rates (Monk, 2007). As a result, these schools are often seen as temporary positions for teachers seeking longer-term employment elsewhere.

Many teachers in Northern Indigenous schools also serve as programmers, adding complexity to their roles. Most teachers are not community members and often come from different cultural backgrounds. Non-Indigenous teachers face cultural challenges and may avoid

initiating changes due to fear of offending locals or not having their contracts renewed (Oskineegish, 2015). Sensitivity to the history of residential schools also makes many hesitant to lead programs for Indigenous youth. This results in high staff turnover, stalling progress and limiting program sustainability (Mueller et al., 2011). Constant turnover impedes the development of crucial trusting relationships within Indigenous communities.

Relationships

Developing strong relationships in Indigenous communities is crucial, as documented in the literature (Dubnewick et al., 2019; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; McHugh et al., 2019) found that positive sport experiences for Indigenous youth were heavily influenced by relationships with family, coaches, schools, and role models. Similarly, Giles and Lynch (2012) concluded that sport program success and sustainability in Indigenous communities improve when programs are community-driven, requiring a relational approach. Dubnewick et al. (2019) also emphasized the importance of relational ethics in Indigenous recreation programs by highlighting the power of relationships between people during recreation programs. This conclusion applies broadly: any form of learning and teaching benefits from positive relationships. Landertinger et al. (2021) stressed the importance of long-term partnerships between universities, Indigenous organizations, education authorities, and community partners to develop positive relationships for effective programming and research. Building positive relationships with Indigenous communities and youth involves positive interactions, communication, and knowledge sharing. This can be achieved through recurring, long term, programming, giving the space for relationships to form and progress to take place (Rynne and Rossi, 2012). Just as important as program continuity, stable programmers are crucial for the success of youth programs;

supporting their retention and preventing burnout requires focusing on their relationships with employers, colleagues, and participants.

Implications

From the literature we know that people are the most important aspect of programs and providing youth with wellness opportunities. Kolahdooz et al., (2015) specifically noted that there is a scarcity of scientific studies regarding the barriers to, and opportunities for, education among Indigenous populations which directly relates to the people that offer said education/activities. Successful recurring programming has been difficult to study due to the *come and go* nature of many programs that take place in isolated Northern communities. While there have been some studies that have looked at the programs themselves, very little research exists that examines the experience of the people who offer programming in these challenging, often under-resourced locations. This brings up questions about sustainability and what conditions need to be met in order to make this work feasible for the long-term. Along with that, it is important to look at how the programmer experiences differ in isolated communities as opposed to urban settings where more extensive research has been conducted (Mason et al., 2019; Kerpan and Humbert, 2015; Schaefer et al., 2017). Kolahdooz et al., (2015) and Bruner et al., (2016) both recommended further research on strategies for overcoming educational barriers in diverse educational settings, which includes Northern communities.

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Methodology

Philosophical Paradigms

I used a constructivist, interpretivist approach with a relativist ontology, viewing knowledge as socially constructed and reality as context-dependent. Rather than seeking an

absolute "Truth," I aimed to illustrate the diverse experiences of individuals involved in programming within MLCN (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This paradigm highlights the importance of understanding different perspectives and contextual nuances, and holds a space open for diverse epistemological frameworks, other ways of knowing.

Relational ontology, which views the world as interconnected entities forming a complex web of relationships, is central to this study and fostered a community-based approach which emphasizes strengths and assets rather than deficits (Wildman, 2010).

Method

Qualitative descriptive design was used to provide a comprehensive inquiry into programmers' lived-experience in common, everyday terms. This was important as the community specifically requested that the study be practical and understandable, one of the strengths of this method. The goal was to present an accurate portrayal of their experience, grounded in the participants' own words and interpretations (Sandelowski, 2000; 2010). The interview responses provided a deeper understanding of organizing and facilitating wellness camps and the factors contributing to a sustainable program for both the community and the programmers.

Framework

This study is part of the "mitho waskiwiwin: Moving Well Together Partnership", a Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) project aimed at fostering relationships between Indigenous communities and the University of Saskatchewan to enhance physical activity for Indigenous youth and potential pathways to university. To counteract colonial research methods, we co-developed this larger project with MLCN, focusing on their priorities and ensuring self-determination in the evaluation process. Community-identified

priority areas, such as recruiting and sustaining youth wellness programmers, informed this specific study. Our diverse research team includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, with ongoing efforts to involve community co-researchers. There is value in community knowledge translation and an understanding that sharing this work could help other researchers and programmers in different contexts.

Participants

The target group for this study consisted of professionals involved in wellness programming in the community over the past four years. Due to my role within the community, I had met this group two years earlier and had the opportunity to work alongside them during camps. Leveraging this connection, I purposefully invited all seven programmers to participate in the study to which they all accepted. The group was composed of six non-Indigenous and one Indigenous programmers, mostly from Edmonton, Alberta. All of the study participants were male; though bringing in additional female programmers became a priority as the camps continued to grow. One participant had worked full-time in MLCN for six years as a physical education teacher. The other six had worked on a consistent but casual basis, usually averaging at least one weekend of programming bi-monthly. Most were current or former educators and coaches with a passion for physical activity and a background in high-level sports. Six of the programmers were recruited to the Wellness Hub through connections with community leaders, particularly Dr. Sean Lessard, and did not have any other previous connection to Montreal Lake.⁶ The remaining programmer was hired by the community as a physical education teacher prior to being asked to participate in the Wellness Hub.

Data Collection

⁶ Sean is currently an associate professor at the University of Alberta as well as a MLCN band member. Previously, he held the role of Superintendent of Education within the MLCN Education Department.

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The semi-structured interview guide⁷ was developed based on community considerations, my constructivist approach, and the information that was collected during my literature review. Participants were also invited to contribute five questions they wanted to know more about in regard to other programmers' experiences. The questions were collected through email, thematized for redundancy, and added to the interview guide. Within the questions, prompts were included to invite participants to share personal stories from their work in MLCN. The 23 open-ended questions were organized into the following six categories: (A) Background Questions; (B) Experiences Working in Indigenous Communities; (C) Challenges / Barriers; (D) Shirting Landscape; (E) Evaluation Aspects; (F) Future Oriented Questions.

The interviews were conducted in-person, except for one which took place via Zoom, during a Summer Wellness Camp in MLCN. Participants joined me individually in a private room, sitting across from each other with a laptop used for recording. I explained the interview process, ensuring they felt comfortable answering freely. I employed probing questions to encourage detailed responses, resulting in conversations lasting 30-45 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed using TranscribeMe software, with participant names replaced by pseudonyms for privacy. This allowed for easy editing of transcripts and facilitated the analysis process.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis served as the method for analyzing the data in this study, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step approach, which includes: (1) Data familiarization; (2) Generating codes; (3) Constructing themes; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining themes; and (6) Writing up the results. This dynamic process involves continuous refinement, review, coding, and re-coding to ensure a comprehensive grasp of emerging themes, specifically those relevant to

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⁷ A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A

the research question. Coding was conducted manually before the results were shared with a critical friend (Sparkes and Smith, 2013) as well as the broader research team. They were also compared to personal observations from my time in the community for added rigor. During the analysis, codes inconsistent with the established themes underwent re-evaluation and were either reassigned to alternative themes or discarded if deemed irrelevant. All codes and themes emerged from participants' responses and our interpretations, consistent with the constructivist paradigm. A flowchart⁸ was created to visually represent the main and supporting themes, shared with the research team for feedback, ensuring reliability and credibility through collaborative analysis. This approach facilitated critical reflection on the research process, and data saturation was not considered due to the nature of our constructivist research approach.

Ethical Obligations

The study received ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan's Research Ethics Board.⁹ Prior to the interviews, each participant was guided through a Participant Consent Form outlining procedures, funding, risks, benefits, compensation, confidentiality, and data storage.¹⁰

Two main ethical challenges emerged while conducting this study. First, knowing the history of research *on* Indigenous Peoples, special attention was given to ensure our study remained strength-based by focusing as much as possible on successes rather than challenges and deficiencies, while still giving space for honest conversations with participants. Efforts were made to acknowledge these challenges constructively, aiming for positive progress rather than criticism of the community. Internal tensions may have been present for participants, especially

⁸ Appendix B

⁹ Appendix C

¹⁰ Appendix D

with the knowledge that this study would eventually be shared back to MLCN leadership which could possibly impact their future with the community; therefore, participant names were kept anonymous by using aliases.

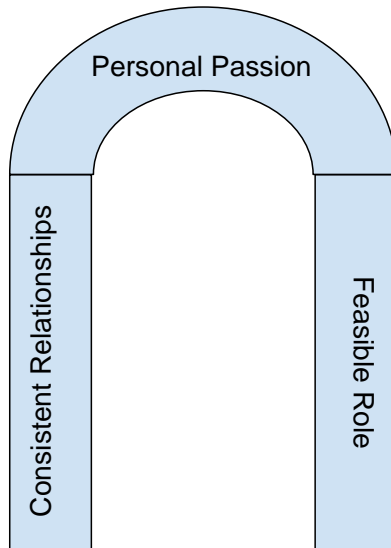
The second challenge involved my personal bias and connection to both the study and participants. Adhering to a constructivist framework, it was important to be transparent about my bias in order to add a layer of reflexivity to this process. Part of this included regularly setting aside time to conduct critical reflections with research colleagues and my supervisor around inclusions and exclusions. The goal of this process was to use my deep connection to the study, community, and participants as a strength, rather than a weakness.

Results and Discussion

The following section is a combination of the results and discussion and contains the results of the programmer interviews, categorized into two sub-themes, Consistent Relationships and Feasible Role, that together support the overall theme, Personal Passion. The themes are then analyzed in the context of other literature which situates this study within the broader academic discourse. Given my long term engagement in the program and community, I utilize my own observations as a researcher with a unique positionality to the study, community, and program to further add to the results and discussion.

Personal Passion

Figure 1: Theme Results



The importance of passion emerged as the dominant theme when examining the experience of the programmers in the Montreal Lake Wellness Hub. "Fulfilling" and "rewarding" were common one-word responses participants used to describe their time working alongside youth in MLCN. When Ethan, a teacher who had been working in the community full-time for over six years, was asked to describe his career in MLCN in one word, he chose "passion" (Ethan, 07:33). He then elaborated, "In the end, it doesn't matter what the program is named. The most important part is to have an impact on the lives of the youth" (Ethan, 03:57). The participant responses clearly indicate a level of personal investment from the programmers towards their work, but it is important to consider what fostered this amount of passion within an environment that literature suggests is typically challenging to sustain (Harper, 2000; Klinck et al., 2005; Lavoie et al., 2016; Monk, 2007). In their lives outside of their work in MLCN, the participants have all been involved with playing and coaching sports on top of their regular work duties. This commitment to sacrificing their free time to participate in and facilitate wellness

Commented [MOU4]: Where did this passion stem from – I am interested in getting to know the participants, suggest vignettes, or a description of the participants. What is their personal background, is this what has created a passion – important to understand where this passion comes from in order to answer the above question of what characteristics you would look for as a programmer.

activities shows a clear intrinsic motivation towards investing in their own personal health and wellbeing, as well the health and wellbeing of the youth they coach. Still, what is unique to this group is that the participants' passion was strong enough to keep bringing them back to a community over seven hours away from their homes and families. Responses from programmers such as, "I think every time I go home, I'd say my heart is full" (Owen, 03:12), and "I mean, it's so fulfilling. Every time we come here, we go back with stories. And we put smiles on people's faces at home too" (Leo, 24:10), illustrate that the programmers' connection to the community goes far beyond the confines of a typical employment agreement. To understand how these programmers can be so passionate about their work in an environment that is traditionally not conducive to long-term employment, we must explore the two themes that make this level of commitment and fulfillment possible.

Consistent Relationships

Community Connector. MLCN's Wellness Hub team did not form by accident. It was the vision of Dr. Sean Lessard, who at the time held a leadership role within MLCN's Education Department, to recruit a team of programmers to run wellness interventions within the community. In the early stages, Sean reached out to a few trusted colleagues and friends to ask if they would be interested in joining him in Northern Saskatchewan. This included reaching out to Dr. Lee Schaefer to begin discussions on incorporating a research component into the program. As one of the original programmers, Adam mentioned, "I'd done some work in Enoch with Dr. Sean Lessard... I think he felt comfortable enough to bring me along to his home community" (Adam, 03:56). As the program began to expand and new needs were identified, Sean continued recruiting more programmers through his connections to bring a new dynamic to the team. Owen, a former National Team soccer player, shared that, "I play hockey with Sean. So the

community is known for having some good soccer players, and they decided that, hey, who do we have that can come teach some soccer skills? And they asked if I would like to do it, and I said yes” (Owen, 02:31). Similarly, Ryan, a former University of Alberta hockey player, was recruited to help fill the need for hockey development. In his words, “I knew Sean and some of the guys that were in the group who I already was friends with. So, it made it a pretty easy yes for me to come and join in” (Ryan, 05:23). Over time, a team began to form with Sean acting as not only the ‘captain’ but also the ‘general manager,’ doing everything in his power to continue bringing good people into his home community.

As an accomplished professor and researcher in the field of Indigenous education and wellness, Sean was eager to explore the potential benefits of creating a wellness program in the MLCN (Giles & Darroch, 2014; Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013; Warburton & Bredin, 2019). As a leader within the MLCN Education Department, he was aware of the many challenges that Northern communities face when it comes to recruiting and retaining employees (Klinck et al., 2005; Monk, 2007). By recruiting trusted colleagues, Sean leveraged pre-existing relationships and used that trust to not only provide the community with reputable programmers but also provide the programmers with assurance that they would be entering a positive work environment with a solid team. Though I wasn’t actively recruited by Sean to work in the community, he certainly played a prominent role in my decision to stay in the community long-term. I felt inspired by his vision and passion for the school and community and knew I wanted to be a part of this journey. The significance of Sean acting as the connector between the community and programmers could easily be overlooked, but instead should be recognized as the starting point of a mutually beneficial relationship. Sean’s role and connection in the community provided entry into MLCN for the programmers, a sensitive and often slow-moving process that

is well-documented in previous research (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kowalsky et al., 1996; McGregor, 2018). Without a community connector like Sean, it is hard to imagine how this long-term relationship would have ever begun and, more importantly, be sustained over time.

Connection to Youth Over Time. While Sean acted as the connector to get the programmers to take a chance on coming to Montreal Lake, the number one thing that kept the participants coming back was the connection to youth that has been cultivated over time. As noted by Sam, "... the love for these kids started to grow every time. And now it's to the point where we're so excited to see these kids, right, and come here for them" (Sam, 4:17). This excitement grew as relationships were fostered with the youth, but this was not an easy process as the initial programming days included few participants and a low level of engagement. As Leo noted, "... it probably [took] a year just to build the trust with the kids. Because you come one time, that doesn't mean anything, right? But when you keep coming back, that's where you build the trust" (Leo, 06:03). This was also confirmed by Max, who said, "So for me, I would say that it took at least a year or two before we really started to gain their trust" (Max, 05:30). Trust seemed important to the programmers, and as the youth began to trust the programmers, it seemed the connection between them grew stronger. This bond now extends far beyond the program itself as many of the youth regularly interact with the programmers between camps via social media, texting, FaceTime, and even in person when their paths cross. This is especially significant to Max, who said, "I think that over the past four years, we've made some incredible progress building relationships. And I see that just in terms of communication, the kids sending me notes all the time, whether it's on Messenger or on text" (Max, 05:30). The messages are sometimes just to say hello, or to send an update about a sporting event, and oftentimes to ask when the programming will be happening again. As Leo notes, "Even on our way up here, we

were getting texts from all the kids like, ‘Are you coming? Is it still on?’ And so they are looking forward to it. They are excited, which is huge” (Leo, 22:00). The ongoing programming was made possible by a commitment from community leaders to keep the program going during its early stages despite the modest attendance. This allowed for ongoing programming over the years and fostered a space where youth and programmers could bond together while participating in positive movement and wellness experiences.

The importance of a relationship and its connection to program success has been documented in previous literature (Dubnewick et al., 2019; Ferguson et al., 2021; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; McHugh et al., 2019), but surprisingly very few studies have spoken to connecting with youth as a strong link to programmer longevity and sustainability. In a previous paper, Landertinger et al. (2021) noted the importance of long-term partnerships to create time and space for relationships to form but focused more so from the broad community’s perspective rather than looking at intersectional reciprocal relationships between youth, programmers, and community. There are a number of reasons for the lack of literature supporting this finding. One is that consistent programming in, oftentimes isolated, Northern communities is difficult to sustain due to the travel required to get to these locations (Huffman & Galloway, 2010). On a similar vein, funding for long-term programs can be difficult to secure as most agencies like to see a quick return on investment (Jiwa et al., 2008). While there may be long-term programs underway in Northern communities, oftentimes research, and thus knowledge translation from an academic perspective, does not accompany these programs. Extended time in community, consistent funding, and an opportunity to co-compose research has allowed us to explore why our participants, programmers, were able to develop a deep connection with the youth over time.

As someone who works in the community full-time, relationships with youth are also an important aspect of my experience. As my former full-time colleague and study participant Ethan explains, “For me, what is keeping me here is the happiness in the youth's eyes” (Ethan, 10:44). Being around the community regularly allowed these connections to form much faster than the other programmers who came in intermittently. While positive, these relationships can be a double-edged sword. I constantly struggle between deepening these connections outside of school and maintaining a healthy work/life balance. My wife and I, both working at the school, do our best to keep work separate from our personal lives. Despite many rewarding interactions, there are challenging moments, such as receiving a distressing message from a student at home, which create internal tensions about forming deep relationships with youth.

Connection to Team Over Time. When looking at the composition of the Wellness Hub team, it is clear assembling a consistent group of like-minded individuals created a team-like atmosphere that was supportive for long-term sustainability. As Max highlights, “To come up here and work with all like-minded people that just honestly care about kids is pretty amazing” (Max, 26:57). Nearly every programmer also alluded to this connection in some way during their interviews. For Ryan, “...working with the guys [is what's] keeping me coming back. Friendship with all of them, friendship with Sean.” (Ryan, 18:16). Sam then takes it a little deeper by saying,

“The camaraderie, yeah. And for sure coming up with the same guys, that we all know the kids. We all are on the same page. We can go home and we can talk about the kids, which we do every day. We talk about all these kids, “Okay. What are our strategies tomorrow?” or, “Who do we need to work with?” or, “Who do we hope comes tomorrow?”. I think that that's so important as a team, for us to all know the kids and all

know what needs to be done. And I think it's such a great team that Sean has built here, really moving us in the right direction (Sam, 14:21).

Coming in as a unified team also has clear correlation to the passion and energy levels of the programmers. Concisely noted by Max, "When everyone's on the same page it's just a ton of fun to be around" (Max, 02:57). He later elaborates further with,

"So to come in with a group with super high energy and staying positive and all be on the same goal and just all having that same passion to try and help out some of the people that are here is very important, because if we start coming down with one or two people and the energy drops or the passion drops, then it's not worth it for us to be here" (Max, 14:56).

Elegantly summed up by Owen, "Whatever Sean is doing or however he's putting the teams together, there's good people, and good people create good things" (Owen, 22:19).

Previous research that has made the connection between successful, long-term programs and the programmers/teachers that are tasked with delivering them (Klinck et al. 2005; Crooks et al., 2010; Blodgett et al., 2008; Hudson et al., 2020). Though not the scope of this study, looking broadly at the importance of team cohesion and dynamics in the workplace reveals that it plays an important role in employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention (Fapohunda, 2013; Johnson et al., 2000). Knowing this, it is not surprising that many Northern wellness programs lack that strong connection to a team as programmers are often asked to run their programs alone due to limited staffing and budgets (Carr-Stewart et al., 2011). This reality is something I have personally felt impacted by as a full-time employee in the community. Since starting this work, I have only had a limited social relationship with my colleagues due to my age, interests, and background. This is a stark contrast to many of my friends who are teachers in the city and have

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much more in common with their younger, sports-minded colleagues. Each time the programmers are down to run a camp, I am reminded about the lasting impact that positive friendships at work can have on my morale. By placing an emphasis on bonding together as a group after the camps wrap-up for the day, the programmers are able to focus on their own wellbeing after a long day of promoting youth wellness, which in turn creates a sustainable environment. This was designed intentionally by Sean who knew in order to be sustained during difficult work, there needs to be moments of wellness infused for the programmers as well. These moments as a team—golfing, fishing, playing hockey, or watching a game while enjoying a meal—have also been shared with many community leaders over the years which has provided a space to grow relationships and connections outside of work. Spending time together, apart from the program itself, was what originally helped me to bond with a group of strangers that I now consider my friends.

Feasible Role

Intermittent but Consistent. Coming to the community consistently has been a priority for the programmers from very early on. As Max reflects, “When we first came down here, I think a lot of us had the idea that we were going to change lives in the first camp. We were quickly aware that that wasn’t going to happen because there were so many kids that wouldn’t even make eye contact with us. And I think that over the four years, we’ve made some incredible progress building relationships.” (Max, 05:30). He later mentions, “I think a lot of these kids have had so many organizations that have come in for one or two sessions and then never come back. And I think the kids all just assumed that was going to be us.” (Max, 05:30). Other programmers were also aware of the common trend for programs like these to be one time events. As Leo notes, “We said, “Okay, we’ll be back in August.” And the kids were kind of

like, “Yeah, you’re not coming back.” So when we came back in August, one of the special moments was when one of the kids said, “You guys came back. Nobody ever comes back.” (Leo, 07:08). This comment became almost a motto for the group as they strived to show that they were fully invested in the community and their vision for wellness. Leo later mentioned, “But when we keep coming back, that’s what gives the kids hope as well.” (Leo, 18:39) which highlights his awareness of the significance of a ‘*see you next time*’ mentality over ‘*goodbye*’. The importance of long-term consistency in the program is summed up well by Adam who said, “And I think that the only way you see change with kids is if you see people, really dynamic people, stay for a longer period of time.” (Adam, 15:46).

I struggled to find any literature surrounding this one-and-done phenomenon in Northern communities despite its prevalence. I did come across a study conducted in Australia on Indigenous community sport programs that found that for a program to achieve meaningful outcomes, it must have continuity and not be a one-off (Rynne and Rossi, 2012). In the study, one of the community members and program leaders described the impact of one-time events as “It means it was a good day. I got active for one day ... but what does it mean? ... Because it doesn’t add value to anything, it’s just a good day. Money is spent, money gone, good day, finished.” (Rynne and Rossi, 2012, pg. 29). During my time in the community, I have seen many people and organizations come, offer programming, leave some equipment and resources, and then disappear. I recall a week-long camp at the school during my first year in the community.¹¹ The camp was well-organized and engaging for the students. However, after its conclusion, all that seemed to be left behind was various equipment, water bottles, and teaching resources. Despite their good intentions, these items were ultimately stored away and unused, resulting in

¹¹ Details relating to the type of camp omitted with respect to anonymity.

no lasting impact. During my time in the community, I have regularly been asked the questions “When are the Edmonton guys coming again?” or “When is the next wellness camp?” on an almost weekly basis from youth of all ages. One thing I’ve never been asked is “When is our next guest speaker?”. This leads me to question the impact that one-time programs can have on youth, while also reaffirming the importance of consistency. Conflicting with this is a study by Percy et al., (2019) that found that overall, young people enjoy having guest speakers in their school and find them helpful. While contradictory, perhaps this speaks to the importance of creating exciting opportunities to engage youth by having a ‘good day’, while partnering with existing long-term programs.

Balancing Act. An important factor to mention is that each programmer has a full-time career outside of their role within the Wellness Hub. For them, a more casual workload supports sustainability by only taking up a limited amount of their free time. When asked about the idea of taking on a larger workload in the community, Ryan noted, “With my job and my family, a once every two months kind of schedule that we were on last year worked really nicely for me. It would be really hard, especially with the seven-hour drive, to do it more often.” (Ryan, 27:21). Approaching the question from a different angle, Sam replied, “If we were here all the time, it wouldn’t be as exciting. It would be challenging. I think it’s a tiring job, even when we come for a week, it’s exhausting sometimes...So a lot of respect for anyone that comes up here and works full-time because that would be draining.” (Sam, 15:11). He later follows up this statement with, “Right now, there’s nothing negative about coming here and working with these kids.” (Sam, 05:03). Sam’s response alludes to realities of the work environment, but also shows that a healthy workload can be a powerful tool to enhance sustainability. Rather than overloading a full-time employee with a workload that is likely to burn them out, perhaps the same duties can

Commented [MOU6]: Interesting – let’s make a recommendation here.

be shared by multiple people in smaller amounts. Even if the financial costs of this approach may be higher, the benefit of retaining people long-term would eventually alleviate the costs of regularly hiring and onboarding new employees.

To fully understand the context of this program, we must give space to openly discuss some of those aforementioned challenges and barriers. When asked how they think their experience would be different if they were here full time, one programmer replied, “Seeing the challenges every day and being in the environment every day would be very difficult. I think it would be draining emotionally and physically for teachers and staff.” (Ryan, 19:09). To the same question, another programmer shared:

“I would definitely say having to be full-time here would take a bigger mental toll on a person. Just trying to fight every battle that you have to fight, it might feel like digging a hole. Or even if I thought if I had to move here and I have my family, I’d be like, what does it mean to them? What are they missing out on by being here and not being somewhere else?” (Owen, 11:01).

This candid response speaks to many of the realities that full-time staff face but casual staff may not experience in the same way. Interestingly, these casual positions can also be beneficial for the full-time staff in the community, as emphasized by Ethan who said, “working here continuously as a teacher, you need some time to recover. Coming every one or three months is good because you are bringing new positive energy and the kids will feel it. We as full-time staff will feel it and because we can take a breath; I have other people to help me.” (Ethan, 20:34). As we will explore later, the symbiotic relationship between full-time staff and casual programs also plays a factor in the programmers ability to successfully execute their duties when they arrive in the community.

In order to potentially remove barriers to good health, as suggested by Call to Action #89, we must be able to identify challenges and discuss what strategies have been effective thus far (TRC, 2015). To my knowledge, there have not been any studies conducted that specifically look into the balancing act that programmers must face when trying to execute their duties while trying to sustain themselves in an isolated environment. However, connections could be made to the volume of research on teachers that looks into extreme workloads causing burnout and attrition (Clandinin et al., 2015; Schaefer et al., 2012). Mueller and Carr-Stewart (2011) previously found that recruiting and retaining quality teachers is one of the most important links to student achievement and program success in Indigenous schools. With this knowledge, the conversation could hopefully shift to *'how can we make sure these jobs are designed to be sustainable'* rather than continuing to overload the limited staff that are already doing their best to balance the requirements of their job and personal wellbeing. This aligns with the previously mentioned call for more research into the people that offer educational and wellness activities within Indigenous communities by Kolehdoz et al., (2015).

When reflecting on my experience as a full-time employee compared to the experience of the programmers, I am very appreciative of the level of respect and recognition I was given towards the unique challenges we as full-time staff face, as evident in their previous responses. Very few people can understand the complex barriers we face in this environment and having trusted confidants to talk things through is very supportive for myself to remain solution-focused. Over the years, I have spent countless hours on the phone with Adam; as someone who understands the community context as well as the profession of teaching, he has supported me through many moments of struggle in a way that very few can. Another aspect that makes full-time employment challenging that is important to note was brought up by Ethan who says, “A

one-year contract doesn't give so much stability for anyone." (Ethan, 05:10). This issue is also documented by Monk (2007), who points out that the policies that many First Nation schools operate under are not supportive of long-term employment; one-year contracts (without the protection of a union) create extremely high turn-over rates every year. Like many other full-time staff, this lack of stability and workload demands causes me to wonder about my ability to sustain my wellbeing and my long-term future in the community.

Intersectional Autonomy. As we continue to unpack the experience of the programmers through their own words, we find that they have experienced a level of autonomy over their work which has led to increased success and fulfillment. With many of the programmers being teachers as well, a clear difference relating to their role as programmers compared to their regular careers was highlighted. Ryan mentions, "There's no academics tied to it. A lot of those pressures around the academics bring behaviors and challenges that we are not necessarily seeing." (Ryan, 20:15). This distinction is confirmed by Ethan who says, "When you are going outside of the school, [the youth] can see your human side. You can go beyond the protocols and make friendships with them, talk to them less formally, right? And in this way, they will see that you care about them." (Ethan, 08:56). This separation from the traditional teacher role and ability to freely cater the program to meet the needs of the youth has added to the passion that the programmers feel towards their work within the community. Summed up well by Owen, "... I don't know if everybody loves their jobs or if we're just crazy but we enjoy being here. And I think that's the number one thing." (Owen, 22:19). Another unique characteristic of their role is the limited amount of admin and reporting work that is required from the programmers. When discussing the difference, Ryan notes, "In the city schools, doing different activities outside the schools, there's a lot of red tape. I haven't felt like there's a lot of bureaucracy getting in the way

of what we're doing here." (Ryan, 04:23). This allows the group to focus far more on the youth's "needs and desires in terms of their wellness." (Owen, 17:19).

Just as many scholars have highlighted the importance of strength-based, community specific programming for youth, I also see this as important for sustaining professionals as it allows them to put their time and attention towards the more fulfilling side of teaching, the youth, rather than the more formal obligations of the profession (Akbar et al., 2020; Bruner et al., 2016; Blodgett et al., 2008; Hudson et al., 2020; Okpalauwaekwe et al., 2022; Schaefer and Wasyliv, 2018). From my experience teaching core and elective classes, there is a very limited amount of autonomy that you have within your teaching due to curricular constraints. Legally, I am required to teach a provincial curriculum that does not account for the local culture or the complex needs of the community. Connections can be made to similar research on teachers that offer extra-curricular programming and the impact that those activities can have on their job satisfaction and relationships to youth (Moran, 2017; Thompson, 2013; Rocchi and Camiré, 2018). Engaging in different activities, outside of school and on the land, allows programmers to connect in different ways with different students, while also fostering a connection to culture and community that can't be replicated in a classroom (Crooks et al., 2015; Wildcat et al., 2014; Venugopal et al., 2021). By doing so, programmers are able to avoid the commonly used problem-based approach that accompanies many Indigenous physical activity initiatives (Paraschak and Thompson, 2017). I've observed a clear difference in how students interact with study programmers compared to full-time staff. Intermittent visits from programmers generate excitement that full-time staff, bound by a decontextualized curriculum, cannot achieve. It's evident that these exciting, intermittent interactions enhance mutual positive experiences by providing autonomy for both programmers and students. Despite feeling left out of these

interactions due to my full-time role, I acknowledge the positive impact that increased engagement has for the youth, as well as the positive boost to workplace morale (Crooks et al., 2010; Liebenberg et al., 2019).

Community Support. Though the programmers were responsible for organizing and executing the wellness camps, there were a number of other people who played a supporting role to make it as seamless as possible. Beginning with the financial costs associated with the camps, the programmers benefited by not having to worry about securing funding themselves. Instead, community leaders and grant writers worked behind the scenes to ensure money would be in place. According to Leo, “Sean’s really good at organizing and... takes care of the funding part of it too.” (Leo, 11:06). While the programmers certainly appreciated not having that responsibility fall on their shoulders, Owen brought up an interesting point, “I always hear that Adam’s working on creating grants, so are we always a grant away from not being able to go forward with this programming anymore? Is it that close or is it something that is more sustainable?” (Owen, 08:16). This question shows the level of uncertainty that, even after many years of recurring programming, the team felt towards the future of their work in the community. This uneasy feeling also emerged when Adam shared:

“Bringing in really good people costs money. If you want a really good land-based program at the school, it’s going to cost money. If you want to bring other people to make unique experiences, it’s going to cost money.” (Adam, 21:27)

Candidly, Adam continues to share, “I’m hopeful that the Wellness Hub can continue to move forward, but I’m also realistic. We need support from Chief and Council, and we also need support from administration in the school for that to be possible.” (Adam, 21:27). This statement serves as a clear reminder that even with a motivated team ready to engage with youth, many

other factors must align for it to become reality. Despite the uncertainty, the programmers still had an optimistic view of the future of their work. As Max explained, “I think if we can develop a few more Sean Lessards to come out of the community to be leaders, that’ll be a huge bonus. It’s great for us to come up and to do this, but I think they need some more kids from their community being mentors versus us from Edmonton.” (Max, 24:06). The long-term goal of helping to support youth leadership through the Wellness Hub has come to fruition as a number of programmers spoke to returning youth playing a leadership role; however, further research is needed. In response to this, two other studies are currently underway within the larger MWTP project that are exploring these questions.

The literature shows that the success and sustainability of wellness programs can be enhanced when they originate, and are guided, by community needs and wants which can only be known by taking a relational approach to planning and execution (Giles & Lynch, 2012, Dubnewick et al. 2019). Taking this one step further, the results of these interviews may indicate that a successful program needs even more than just a relational approach guided by community needs. Instead, a community champion in a leadership position may be a more important factor. A difficulty with recruiting and retaining suitable community members was mentioned by Klinck et al., (2005) which aligns with my experience in MLCN where many wellness-related positions have sat vacant due to a lack of applicants.

Another area of logistical support that was noted by nearly everyone was the local full-time staff that support the camps. As Adam puts it, “You cannot have any program run without boots on the ground.” (Adam, 12:37). Many people were highlighted and thanked for their contributions to the camp’s success. This appreciation is also expressed by Max who says, “... the consistency of the people that are here year round is the most important part because if we

don't have people here consistent, then our job is a thousand times tougher and then we can't really support the people that are here." (Max, 13:21). When asked how he has been supported in his role, Sam mentions "I think that little things, like getting the kids breakfast, and having that support from Sherry [school cook]... are steps that are positive because now we're getting some support for these kids. We're not just coming here and we're all by ourselves." (Sam, 13:14). The idea of everything falling on the shoulders of one person came up a number of times, including from Ethan who clearly stated, "One person cannot do everything." (Ethan, 14:19), showing the reality of his experience and the lack of support he has felt over time. This feeling is also captured by Adam who says:

"I just find in the community, so much is done by a few people. So that's the challenge, how do you sustain the people in the community that are doing these pieces? How do you sustain those people? How do you keep them going? How do you not overload them to the point where they just walk away? That's the challenge." (Adam, 09:38)

This statement goes to show the understanding and empathy that the programmers have for the challenging job that the full-time staff in the community have, and also speaks to their consideration for the long-term support for the community.

As made clear from the programmer's responses, community support was extremely important to their ability to smoothly run the program. As a full-time local staff member, I took pride in contributing to the camps' success through logistics and preparation. I appreciated the recognition from the programmers, which motivated me to stay involved and earn their professional respect. However, I also resonated with Ethan and Adam's concerns about burnout among local staff organizing wellness activities with little support. Due to the accumulations of

challenges over my three years in the community, my motivation to offer additional programming beyond my contractual duties has significantly faded.

Conclusion

Summary

Due to the results and discussion being woven together in the section above, I have already attempted to situate my results within the broader context of the literature and discipline. By highlighting the experiences of seven wellness programmers engaged in a long-term program within a Northern Indigenous community, this study uncovered the unique factors that led to their uncommon level of sustainability. Through the interpretation of their words, we were able to discover what has kept them coming back to the community year after year, while also giving space to explore the challenges and barriers that they have faced along the way. Our findings have shown that in order to be sustained in a challenging and isolated environment, programmers must find and maintain a high level of intrinsic passion for the work they are doing. Consistent relationships with the community, youth, and colleagues are important links to ensuring this passion can remain. Along with that, a feasible role that allows for programmer autonomy helps support increased engagement and job satisfaction. Lastly, it is crucial to reiterate the importance of having Sean as the community connector who not only introduced the programmers to MLCN but also helped push for a long-term, consistent relationship between them. With these factors identified, this study helps contribute to the growing body of research surrounding Indigenous wellness programs in Northern communities.

Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this study, worth re-emphasizing, is the deep connection both I, as the researcher, and the programmers, as participants, have with the community. Given that we

are all 'outsiders,' it is rare to find a group from this context that has been consistently involved in programming for at least three consecutive years. This connection enabled us to overcome many challenges we faced throughout this study despite significant changes in the community. It also facilitated trusting, rich conversations during our interviews, leading to the dominant theme of personal passion becoming apparent.

As with any research, this study had limitations. The most prominent being that the findings are specific to a singular community and program and, thus, cannot be generalized to explain the successes and struggles of other programs in different communities. Despite this, the study is still relevant for all leaders involved with programming, staffing, and strategic planning in Indigenous communities as it can be used to generate new ideas and comparisons that may help inform local practice and programs. Another limitation of this study involves MLCN's geographic location compared to other Northern communities. While still isolated, it is important to note that the community is just over an hour away from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan's third-largest city. This is much more accessible than many other Indigenous communities which has undoubtedly made sustaining a program over a period of years easier. Logistical concerns such as group lodging, access to restaurants, and leisure activities are all easily accommodated within 25 minutes of MLCN by visiting Prince Albert National Park or Elk Ridge Resort. This proximity has undoubtedly made sustaining a program in this specific setting easier and more attractive for the programmers.

Next Steps

Currently, other studies around youth and community perception are underway within the larger research project and will add additional context to programmer experiences, providing much-needed context shaped around a youth perspective. Given the longevity of this program,

further research alongside community members who have supported the program will also provide a unique insight into their perceived benefits of the program to youth and community. Over the past year, the Wellness Hub has expanded to other Indigenous communities that Sean has been working alongside which offers a new opportunity to compare successes and challenges between unique environments. This could help us understand what aspects of the program's success and struggles are more universal and which are more linked to local nuances.

Looking forward, an idea deriving from this study that could be explored by community leaders and school administrators is to think creatively about how positions could be altered to allow professionals more flexibility in their program delivery so that youth can truly be the top priority. It is a common buzzword in the education world that schools take a "student-centered approach," but what does this really look like in practice? To me, one thing it could look like is giving professionals the space to work with youth in a holistic way that is free of the colonial pressures of teaching, schools, and athletic progression. If we allow professionals to meet youth where they are with love and positivity, without strict external employment expectations, we could create a culture of employees that are more motivated and sustained to give their best over a long period of time.

Chapter 3

Conclusion: Thoughts and Future Directions

Due to having one manuscript as the document that outlines my overall Thesis, some of this conclusion section will seem redundant. It is still helpful to summarize some of the main contributions in regard to the broader context of the literature. Future directions are also discussed as well as a reiteration of the strengths and limitations of this work.

As a teacher and former wellness consultant that has spent my whole career working in Indigenous communities, I have both witnessed and personally experienced many challenges that make executing long-term programs difficult. This lived-experience made me interested in learning more about the MLCN Wellness Hub and the unique approach they were taking that—from my perspective—seemed to be more successful than other initiatives taking place in the school and community. From there, my curiosity led to enrolling in graduate school and envisioning this study. By utilizing a semi-structured interview approach, observations, and the method of reflexive thematic analysis I was able to focus on the experiences of seven wellness program leaders involved in a long-term initiative in a Northern Indigenous community. Through the analysis, we discovered what has drawn them back to the community year after year and provided space to explore the challenges and barriers they have faced. It is important that we take the time to highlight some of the key takeaways that emerged.

Our findings indicate that sustaining efforts in a challenging and isolated environment requires a high level of intrinsic passion for their work. As noted in many previous studies, relationships are a crucial aspect of working with Indigenous youth and in Indigenous communities (Dubnewick et al. 2019; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; McHugh et al. 2019). While many previous studies focused on the youth perspective of relationships being important, our study

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found that these relationships are also significant for long-term programmer fulfillment and connection. We also found that a great deal of time was needed for these relationships to form which presents the challenge of ensuring that the programmers are highly supported in the early stages of the relationship to motivate them to push through the initial growing pains they may face. As a way of supporting this, we can unpack our next key takeaway from the study: intermittent, but consistent interactions. This concept was not previously explored in literature, but proved to be an important aspect of programmer sustainability. By design, the Wellness Hub program was set up as a series of multi-day experiences that would take place consistently throughout the year. This allowed the programmers to feel energetic and inspired each time they came to the community and minimized some of the challenges that previous studies identified as being major barriers to long-term work in isolated Indigenous communities (Monk, 2007; Mueller et al., 2011; Oskineegish, 2015). This situation also helped make recruiting quality programmers easier as it allowed them to continue their established careers and personal lives without the need to relocate and start over. Building on that concept, programmer autonomy emerged as a major sustaining factor as it allowed each professional the flexibility to use their best judgement with planning, executing, and evaluating the program without the external pressures and expectations that are commonly found in the teaching profession (Akbar et al., 2020; Bruner et al., 2016; Blodgett et al., 2008; Hudson et al., 2020; Okpalauwaekwe et al., 2022; Schaefer & Wasyliv, 2018). Lastly, we must emphasize the importance of Sean as the community connector who introduced the programmers to MLCN and promoted a long-term, consistent relationship between them. Sean's role and positionality within MLCN is extremely unique and thus, we were not able to find any literature highlighting a similar situation, but the broader concept of having community leaders that believe in a vision and find ways to turn them

into reality is crucial to the success of an initiative. Together, these identified factors contribute to the growing body of research on Indigenous wellness programs in Northern communities.

Strengths and Limitations

A significant strength of this study is the deep connection between both the researcher and the participants with the community. As 'outsiders,' it is uncommon to find a group that has been consistently involved in programming for at least three consecutive years. This connection enabled us to overcome many challenges throughout the study, despite significant changes in the community. It also facilitated trusting, rich conversations during our interviews, leading to the dominant theme of personal passion emerging.

However, like any research, this study had limitations. The findings are specific to a single community and program and cannot be generalized to other programs in different communities. Nonetheless, the study remains relevant for all leaders involved in programming, staffing, and strategic planning in Indigenous communities, as it can generate new ideas and comparisons that may inform local practices and programs. Another limitation involves MLCN's geographic location compared to other Northern communities. While still isolated, MLCN is just over an hour from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan's third-largest city, which is more accessible than many other Indigenous communities. This proximity has undoubtedly made sustaining a program over the years easier. Logistical concerns such as group lodging, access to restaurants, and leisure activities are easily accommodated within 25 minutes of MLCN by visiting Prince Albert National Park or Elk Ridge Resort, making it easier and more attractive for the programmers to sustain the program.

Next Steps

Currently, other studies on youth and community perception are underway within the larger research project, adding additional context to programmer experiences shaped around a youth perspective. Further research alongside community members who have supported the program will provide unique insights into their perceived benefits for youth and the community. Over the past year, the Wellness Hub has expanded to other Indigenous communities where Sean has been working, offering new opportunities to compare successes and challenges across different environments. This could help us understand which aspects of the program's success and struggles are universal and which are more linked to local nuances.

Looking ahead, an idea from this study for community leaders and school administrators to explore is how to creatively alter positions to allow professionals more flexibility in program delivery, prioritizing youth. The concept of a "student-centered approach" is often discussed in education, but what does it look like in practice? It could involve giving professionals the space to work with youth holistically, free from the colonial pressures of teaching, schools, and athletic progression. Allowing professionals to meet youth where they are with love and positivity, without strict external employment expectations, could create a culture of motivated employees sustained to give their best over a long period.

Appendix

A: Interview Guide

Interview Questions for Study 1: mitho waskiwiin: MWTP programmers study

Background Questions

1. Can you describe both your educational background and your current job/position?
2. Can you describe your past experiences, prior to the MWTP project, working alongside Indigenous youth?
3. How long have you been working in Montreal Lake Cree Nation alongside youth?

Experiences working on reserve

1. What excites you most about working with Indigenous youth living on-reserve?
2. What are some of the unique advantages to working in an Indigenous school compared to an urban school?
3. What influenced you to work with / at Montreal Lake?
 - a. How can we create similar opportunities to attract qualified staff to work full-time in the community?
4. If you had to describe your experience in Montreal Lake thus far in one word what might that be?
 - a. Can you elaborate on why you chose this word to describe your experiences thus far?
5. How are you making personal connections and building relationships with the youth in Montreal Lake?
6. What have you learned about the youth in Montreal Lake over the time you spent with them?
7. Is there a specific story about one or two of the youth that brings a smile to your face when you think about working alongside them over the past number of years?
 - a. Can you elaborate on why this story brings a smile to your face?
8. While you have worked with the MTL youth in community, you have also brought them to other places (Edmonton, Saskatoon, etc). Do you see these off-reserve experiences as an important part of the programming?
 - a. Can you explain why you do, or do not, see them as important?
 - b. If you do see them as important, do you have any stories or experiences that would help to illustrate why they are important?

Challenges/Barriers

1. Have you experienced any challenges working in Montreal Lake?
 - a. If you have experienced challenges, can you articulate 2-3 challenges you have personally experienced/witnessed while working in the community over the timeframe?

2. Has there been supports in place to overcome the challenges you may have experienced
 - a. What supports might be helpful to overcome the aforementioned challenges

Shifting Landscape

1. Has the nature of your work changed over the 3 year timeframe with the children and youth of ML? If so, how? If not, why do you think it has remained the same?
2. Have you noticed any changes in the youth over the past 3 years?
 - a. Do you have a specific story or experiences you would like to share that illustrates these changes?

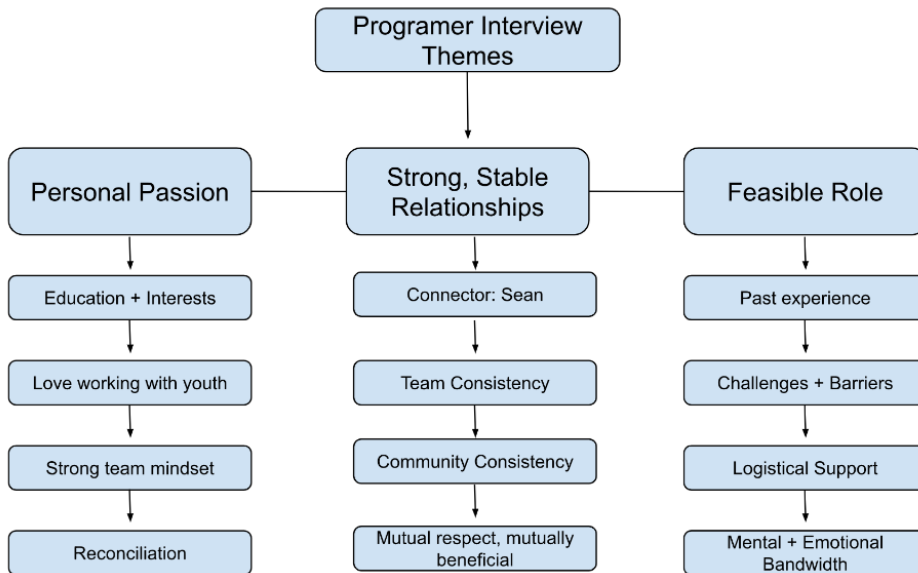
Evaluation aspects

1. How would you meaningfully measure short, medium, and long-term success of the work being done in Montreal Lake? What are some things you would want to see accomplished in those time frames?
2. How do you perceive your work with the children youth of Montreal Lake has impacted the children and youth? In what way has it impacted you?
3. In your experiences, what factors contribute to *student success* when working with the children and youth of Montreal Lake?
4. In your opinion, what does the community in Montreal Lake gain from having ongoing wellness programming take place on a consistent basis?
5. If you could articulate what you hope students walk away with after participating in the wellness experiences, what would this be?
 - a. From your experience, have you seen any broader benefits to the community?
6. What have you learned about Indigenous youth from your time spent working alongside them?

Future oriented questions:

1. Now that you have been involved in a number of different wellness-related activities and initiatives with children and youth in the community, where do you see the future of this work? In your estimation, what will change? What will stay the same?
2. Have we missed any questions you think are important, or do you have anything else to add?

B: Theme Chart



C: Ethics Approval



Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) 11-Jan-2023

Certificate of Approval

Application ID: 3744

Principal Investigator: Lee Schaefer

Department: College of Kinesiology

Locations Where Research

Activities are Conducted: Montreal Lake Cree Nation, Little Red Cree Nation, University of Saskatchewan, Canada

Student(s): Ben Verrall
Mckenna Hall
Payton Hall
Yu Tong Tang

Funder(s): Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Title: Mitho Waskiwiwin Moving Well Together

Approved On: 11-Jan-2023

Expiry Date: 11-Jan-2024

Approval Of: Behavioural Research Ethics Application

Interview Questions

Consent Forms (interview and focus group)

Recruitment Email

Acknowledgment Of: TCPS2 Core Certificates (Verrall, M. Hall, P. Hall, Tang)

Review Type: Delegated Review

CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans TCPS 2 (2018). The University of Saskatchewan Beh-REB has reviewed the above-named project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this project, and for ensuring that the authorized project is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the current approved protocol. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures must be reported to the Chair through submission of an amendment for Beh-REB consideration in advance of implementation.

To remain in compliance, a status report (renewal of closure form) must be submitted to the Beh-REB Chair for consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion. Please refer to the Research Ethics Office website for further instructions and current forms.

**Digitally Approved by Pammla Petrucka
Chair, Behavioural Research Ethics Board
University of Saskatchewan**

D: Consent Forms



Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: mitho waskawiwin: moving well together partnership (MWTP).

Student Researcher(s):

Ben Verrall	MSc, Kinesiology	USask	bjv932@mail.usask.ca
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Researcher(s):

Dr. Lee Schaefer	Principal investigator/ Associate Professor	Kinesiology	USask	Lee.schaefer@usask.ca
Dr. Sean Lessard	Co-Principal investigator/ Associate Professor	Secondary Education	University of Alberta	slessard@ualberta.ca
Dr. Leah Ferguson	Co- Applicant/ Associate Professor	Kinesiology	USask	Leah.ferguson@usask.ca

Principal Investigator/Supervisor:

Dr. Lee Schaefer (Principal Investigator). College of Kinesiology, USask. Lee.schaefer@usask.ca

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

- The purpose of this research is to better understand the experiences of physical activity programmers who have been working alongside Indigenous youth in Montreal Lake Cree Nation.

Procedures:

- Data for this study will be collected in two different ways. First we will conduct a 1 hour semi-structured interview. Following the analysis of the audio recorded and transcribed transcripts a circle conversation will take place to discuss themes that have emerged. You may choose to have the audio recording device turned off at any time without giving a reason and may withdraw from the study at any time.

- o **CHANGE TO:** *Data for this study will be collected by conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews that will last approximately 1 hour. You may choose to have the audio recording device turned off at any time without providing reasoning and may withdraw from the study at any given time.*
- Interviews will take place in Montreal Lake Cree Nation when possible after programming times to make it convenient for participants. For ease of participants, zoom meetings may also be used if meeting face to face is not convenient.
 - o If remote meetings are required for some participants, this study will utilize Zoom video communication service for semi-structured interviews. The services privacy policy can be viewed here (<https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/>)
 - o Any data stored on Zooms servers will be stored in Canada as per USask's agreement with Zoom communication services
 - o If Zoom interviews are needed, the interviews will be audio recorded and saved to a trusted USask computer and will not be saved to the cloud.
- Transcription of raw data will be provided by a third-party service (TranscribeMe) and will be anonymous (participant #'s will be used to identify participants).
 - o TranscribeMe Privacy Policy: <https://www.transcribeme.com/privacy/>
- After your interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcript as you see fit. *You will have up to two weeks to provide any feedback on your transcript, if no feedback is provided after two weeks, the original transcription of the raw data will be used for the final report (data will be used as is)*
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Funded by:

- This study is fully funded through the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- There are no conflicts of interest.

Potential Risks:

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

COVID-19 Protocols

- Participants are encouraged to wear masks if possible when arriving to research settings, however masks are not required for interview data collection so as to maintain comfort of the participants
 - o Participants will have the option to wear masks during interviews if so wished
- If participants feel sick in the days prior to data collection it is asked that participants are symptom free for 24 hours prior to taking part in any research interactions
 - o If participant tests positive for COVID-19 it is asked that they disclose that they are ill to researchers and refrain from participation until a negative test result has been indicated
 - There may be opportunity for data collection to be rescheduled in the event of a participant becoming ill that wishes to still take part in the study
 - If a participant tests positive for COVID-19 it is asked that they refrain from participation until a negative test result is obtained
- Any other concerns around COVID-19 can be discussed with the researcher so that accommodations can be made to ensure that participants are as comfortable as possible during their time engaging with this study

Potential Benefits:

- Given the important work you have been engaged in, sharing your insights will provide a number of benefits to yourselves and others:

- o Personally, you will benefit from being given the opportunity to reflect on your time spent in the community
- o Your knowledge will provide other programmers and Indigenous communities with insights into:
 - The intricacies of the program and how it was constructed
 - Road blocks/barriers to implanting the programming
 - Meaningful experiences alongside youth in community
 - How you have been sustained over an extended period of time (2-3 years)
 - Suggestions you may have around improving programming
 - What it is like to work in an Indigenous community as an outsider to that community

Compensation

- No compensation will be provided

Confidentiality:

- Following the tenants of OCAP, all data collected belongs to the community, thus community has ownership over how the findings are disseminated.
- Following ethical processes and with community consent (community advisory board), dissemination of findings may be published as thesis, peer-reviewed publications, non peer-reviewed publications, community news letters, and through community presentations as well as peer-reviewed conference presentations.
- Although the data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences, the data will be reported in aggregate form so that it will not be possible to identify individuals. Moreover, the consent forms will be stored separately from the data so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses."
- The data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although direct quotations may be reported from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information (ex. the institution employing participants, the position held by participants, etc.) will be removed from the report."
- Participants should be aware that if they decide to take part in interviews using Zoom that there is no guarantee that privacy of internet data can be maintained (ex. IP address)
 - o In the event that Zoom interviews are required, the interviews will be saved to a trusted USask computer rather than the cloud. This computer will be password protected and will have encryption in place to further protect this data
- It is also asked that participants refrain from making unauthorized recordings during the data collection process to further protect the identity of participants in this study
- Because the participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, all of whom are known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said.

Please put a check mark on the corresponding line to grant or deny your permission:

I grant permission to be audio recorded	
I wish not to be audio recorded and would prefer notes to be taken in my interview	

*If you do not wish to be audio recorded in this study, your insight is still valuable, your interview will not be audio recorded but instead will have notes taken about the interview by the interviewer

Please only select one option below:

I wish for my identity to be confidential	
I wish for my identity to be confidential but you may refer to me by a pseudonym	
You may quote me and use my name	
I would like to be acknowledged for contributing to the research	

Storage of Data:

- The PI for this Study, Lee Schaefer, will be responsible for the security and storage of the data
- If hard copies of data are created, these copies will always be stores in a locked cabinet in a locked office.
- During analysis all electronic data will be stored in a password protected computer, but moved to a USask system for long-term storage using OneDrive.
- Physical documents and data such as consent forms will be stored within a locked desk drawer, inside a locked institutional office at the University of Saskatchewan
- Data will be stored for 5 years post publications, following this time data will be destroyed beyond recovery.
- Consent forms pose a risk of the immediate identification of participants in this study, to safeguard against this identification, consent forms will be stored separately from collected data on a password protected USask computer
- A master’s list that connects pseudonyms, personal information and data collected will be stored separately from all collected data for safety. This masters list will be kept until the final report has been produced, once the report is produced the masters list will be destroyed.
- Along with data consent forms will also be destroyed.

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is completely voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- If you wish to withdraw, please notify Dr. Schaefer that you no longer wish to take part in the study.
 - o If you choose to withdraw, your data will be permanently destroyed beyond recovery
 - o Participants will have one month after data collection has concluded to withdraw from this study. Participants will be unable to withdraw their data from the study following the one-month period
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your position (e.g., employment, academic status, access to services) or how you will be treated.

Follow up:

- Once the study is complete info graphics will be created (approximately 12 months after data collection) and will be accessible online to allow for an accessible way to easily understand the

findings. To see the online infographics once they're ready, please contact the PI. Furthermore, participants will have access to all publications.

Questions or Concerns:

- Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1.
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca; 306-966-2975; out of town participants may call toll free 1-888-966-2975.

Future Studies

Please indicate if you would like to be invited to participate in a potential longitudinal study that may take place in next 3 years **Yes or No**

Signed Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant *Signature* *Date*

Researcher's Signature *Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

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