

## Original Research

# Challenges and strategies for success of a sport-for-development programme for First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth

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## ABSTRACT

Canadian policy related to colonialism has created substantial challenges for First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) youth and has had a negative influence on their health and well-being. Sport-for-development (SfD) programmes are beginning to show positive impacts for children and youth internationally. This approach may also be beneficial for FNMI youth in Canada. This research evaluates the implementation of a SfD programme designed to enhance leadership skills for FNMI youth. A qualitative approach that examines contextual and implementation issues was used. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings were organized into themes related to strategies for success and challenges. The strategies for success are broken down into the following six themes: 1) designing youth engagement strategies, 2) being creative and adaptable, 3) being a positive presence, 4) applying experiential learning techniques, 5) balancing the integration of culture with youth voice and 6) identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community. The three themes relating to challenges were 1) community diversity, 2) social issues and 3) staff burnout. Recommendations are provided for issues related to programming and evaluation.

## BACKGROUND

In Canada, the First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) population is growing faster than the general population and is substantially younger with 28% being age 14 and under.<sup>1</sup> As such, they represent an important investment for the future of Canada. Despite this population growth,

FNMI youth continue to be exposed to more social issues than their Canadian peers such as domestic violence<sup>2</sup> and maltreatment,<sup>3</sup> which are issues that can have negative impacts on their psychological and physical health.<sup>4-6</sup> For example, in a young Inuit population in Quebec, researchers found that over 45% of survey respondents reported having had suicidal thoughts.<sup>7</sup> Although there is a lack of research examining health indicators of Métis youth,<sup>8</sup> Kumar found that 19.6% of Metis between the ages of 26 and 59 had experienced thoughts of suicide in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> There is general agreement that these risk factors are the result of trauma created by historical colonial practices.<sup>6, 10, 11</sup> As such, it is important to understand the contextual influences that can affect programming designed to improve outcomes for FNMI youth. This article presents a programme evaluation that examines the implementation of a sport-for-development (SfD) programme designed to enhance leadership skills for FNMI youth in Canada.

Historical Canadian policy has promoted the assimilation and oppression of FNMI people through the application of practices such as the expropriation of land, dishonouring treaties, chronic underfunding, scientific exploitation, prohibition of the use of cultural practices, forced removal of their children to residential schools and systematic placement of their children in out-of-home care.<sup>6, 12-15</sup> As a result, a large portion of the FNMI population live in conditions of poverty, over-crowded housing, reduced access to clean water and lack of access to public resources such as quality education. The health consequences of these conditions are exhibited in the FNMI population as there are higher rates of infectious disease, family dysfunction, maltreatment, abuse, teen pregnancy, addiction, fetal alcohol syndrome, school failure, mental health issues and

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delinquency. One of the most worrisome impacts created by colonial policy is the increased rate of suicide among FNMI youth.<sup>16, 17</sup> Indigenous people experience a range of health disparities that have resulted from colonial policies on an international scale. For example, in Australia researchers found that aboriginals had a higher prevalence of mental health issues than the rest of the non-Aboriginal population.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, researchers examining the well-being of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand found that well-being is lower in indigenous populations in comparison with the general population in every region.<sup>19</sup>

SfD initiatives are designed to use sport to attract participants for the purposes of promoting development outcomes such as public health and education.<sup>20</sup> Coalter uses the term 'sport plus' and 'plus sport' to describe two contrasting approaches to SfD.<sup>21</sup> 'Sport plus' refers to initiatives that use the sport context to promote sport along with other community development outcomes. 'Plus sport' approaches use sport to attract participants, but then the main programming is not sport-based. In this context, sport is used as an incentive to create engagement with the targeted population to improve recruitment and retention.<sup>22</sup> SfD appears to be a promising approach with vulnerable youth around the globe,<sup>23-25</sup> and thus may be useful to apply to FNMI communities. For example, researchers identified that sport participation in a South African township led to the development of youth competencies including improved self-concept, discipline, group skills and respect for others.<sup>26</sup> In India, Kay found that a sports-based intervention designed to promote civic activism and leadership in adolescent women helped participants to gain knowledge and become more empowered.<sup>24</sup> In research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in Australia, Thomson, Darcy and Pearce conducted several case studies of sport programming designed to reduce social inequities that exist between the indigenous population and other Australians.<sup>27</sup> Their findings highlighted the importance of including Aboriginal representatives within program governance, developing community partnerships, empowering the community to promote sustainability and the incorporation of mutually beneficial processes. The Hokowhitu Program is an example of a sports-based positive youth development program targeted at Maori youth.<sup>28</sup> It was adapted from the Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation program<sup>29</sup> and applies a Maori learning method and other cultural concepts. The program was successful in generating positive attitudes toward school, improved coping skills and more optimistic outlooks in the participants.

In Canada, there are some sports-based development programmes that have demonstrated positive outcomes with FNMI youth. For example, in northern Quebec, the Nunavik Youth Hockey Development Program (NYHDP) is a long-standing programme in 14 remote villages designed to enhance Inuit youth development by teaching life skills, increasing physical activity and by fostering the pursuit of education.<sup>30</sup> A recent evaluation of the NYHDP identified that the program was perceived to promote positive outcomes for youth and community. Youth participants experienced enhanced leadership, positive identity and increased participation in school and physical activity.<sup>31</sup> The programme also led to a number of positive community impacts, including improved community infrastructure for recreation, sport and enhanced community partnership.<sup>30, 32</sup> In a similar vein, Ritchie and colleagues used outdoor pursuits to promote development by implementing an outdoor adventure canoe trip for FNMI youth and found that participants exhibited increased resilience after programme completion.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Active Circle is an initiative designed to promote FNMI youth well-being through sport and recreation programming.<sup>34</sup> This programme is designed to support and provide capacity building to grassroots programming and is currently being evaluated using participatory methods. Despite these promising findings and ongoing evaluation, not all SfD programs for FNMI youth have exhibited positive impacts. For example, Galipeau and Giles' research examined Alberta's Future Leaders (AFL) program, a sport-based leadership program that is implemented by predominantly non-FNMI staff.<sup>35</sup> Through their exploration, they found two over-arching discourses that influenced the program, including 1) the notion that all youth can develop leadership skills and that 2) mentorship programming can help First Nations youth avoid negative life paths. They also found that the programme might be perpetuating differential power relationships between programme staff and participants as a result of a lack of acknowledgement of cultural differences. The criticism of perpetuating power relationships has already been raised regarding general SfD programming.<sup>22, 36-38</sup> It is also important to note that Hayhurst and Giles caution against using SfD approaches based on Eurocentric ideals within FNMI communities since these strategies "transmit the very values that some Aboriginal communities are actively trying to resist."<sup>39</sup>

Right to Play (RTP) is a prominent organization within the SfD movement. It originated in 1994 as Olympic Aid, a fundraising initiative that was developed by the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee. RTP's strategy was to involve Olympic athletes as ambassadors.

in fundraising efforts in order to support communities in countries experiencing hardship or conflict. Olympic Aid then became RTP when it was incorporated late in the year 2000, which is when RTP began to independently implement programmes. The majority of programmes implemented by RTP throughout the world would fall under the 'plus sport' approach. Although the majority of programs implemented by RTP have been in developing countries, in 2010, RTP began operations of the Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) programme in two FNMI communities in northern Ontario, Canada. Within PLAY, there are a number of initiatives including the Sport for Development Program, the After-School program, the Play for Diabetes Prevention Program and the Youth Leadership Program (YLP). Each community that chooses to partner with RTP within the PLAY programme must choose one or more of these components. The focus of this research is the YLP programme which has recently expanded from two to over 88 FNMI communities across Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia and Alberta.

Researchers have argued that SfD programs must go beyond sport and offer a developmental intervention.<sup>22, 40</sup> This research is based on the positive youth development (PYD) framework which is grounded in developmental systems theory.<sup>41</sup> PYD was advanced in reaction to the deficit model of youth development and has important implications for perceiving children as having intrinsic potential, abilities to develop a moral identity and being inextricably linked to their environment.<sup>42</sup> Within PYD it is recognized that children and youth have a connection and bi-directional influence on their environment and thus programs and their subsequent impact must be considered within the spectrum of other system effects, including influences from family, school, friends and community. Youth leadership has been identified as an integral component within successful PYD programs and has the potential to have an impact on youth as well as the larger community.<sup>43, 44</sup>

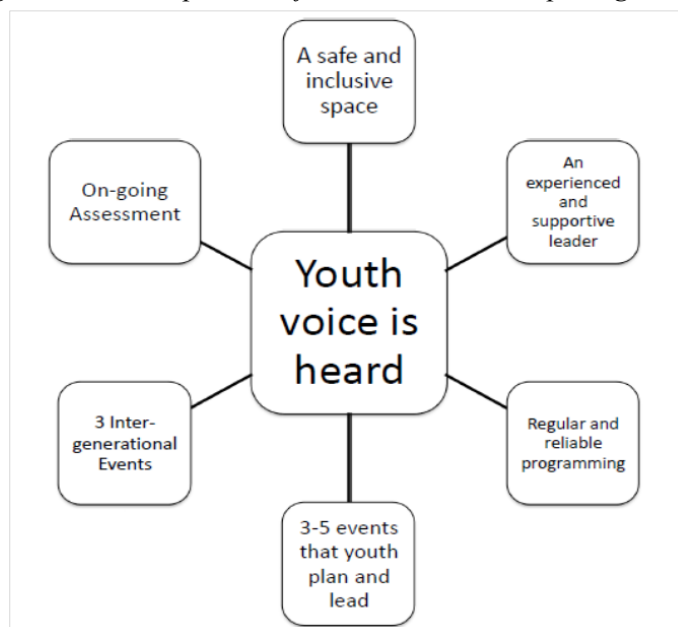
The overall programme objective of the YLP is to support youth in making positive contributions to their community. Through participation in the programme, youth develop leadership skills and apply them to create positive change in their community. Much of the programming includes education delivered using an experiential learning practice called Reflect Connect Apply (RCA). The RCA process involves the delivery of an educational concept. The participants are then encouraged to reflect on the lesson and connect the new knowledge with an experience they have had previously. They are then invited to apply the learning to a practical example in their lives. This approach is particularly relevant within this context as experiential

learning has been found to be more accessible for FNMI youth.<sup>45</sup>

There are seven major components to the YLP (see Figure 1). The first component is youth voice. This component is central to the philosophy of the program. It involves the creation of opportunities for youth to express themselves and to share their vision with others. The second component is the establishment of a safe and inclusive space. This refers to the creation of an environment that is physically and emotionally safe, as well as open to a diversity of participants. This allows the participants to feel welcome and comfortable to share in the programming. The third component involves the incorporation of regular and reliable programming. This component is important for the development of trust and the progression of learning within the programme. This is facilitated through the maintenance of weekly programming at a consistent location. The fourth component involves on-going assessment. This ensures the regular incorporation of participant and community perspectives for quality improvement.

The fifth component involves the implementation of three to five community events. In this venture, youth are involved in organizing, coordinating and evaluating a community event. These initiatives allow the youth to learn by doing within a structured environment. It also engages the community and provides the youth with opportunities to develop leadership skills and confidence in their abilities. The sixth component is the requirement of three inter-generational events. This entails the implementation of three more inclusive events that involve family and other community members. The last component involves the inclusion of an experienced and supportive worker, the Community Mentor (CM). It should be recognized that although this programme is implemented by a SfD organization, the YLP does not explicitly include sport within its design. Many of the communities relied on sport activities heavily to draw youth to the programme, while others incorporated more traditional activities to engage youth depending on local youth interests. For example, some programmes would include a basketball pick-up game as a regular element of their weekly programme. Others might not implement a sport on a weekly basis but might organize a hunting trip as one of their community events.

The CM's are the frontline staff and are responsible for delivering the YLP program, building partnerships within the community and for administering the duties associated with the program. Most CMs are community members of FNMI descent with a background in child and youth work or recreation. These individuals are trained bi-annually by

*Figure 1: The components of the Youth Leadership Programme*

RTP. Since the majority of CMs are from the community where they work, they are often already familiar with the youth within the community and hence with those that participate in the programme. In addition, each CM is supported by a Supervisor located within his/her own community and a RTP Program Officer that is responsible for several communities and makes regular visits to each programme.

Patton defines programme evaluation as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming.”<sup>46</sup> Programme evaluation differs from traditional positivist research in several ways. In traditional positivist research, objectives are based on an examination of relevant literature and of gaps in the current knowledge.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, since programme evaluation occurs in an applied context and is more practical in nature, study designs are typically developed through the consideration of programme goals and stakeholder interest. In spite of the expanding literature, researchers have argued that there is a general lack of programme evaluation within the SfD movement and that many of the existing evaluations do not provide enough depth to capture the full context.<sup>48</sup> Researchers have identified a need for increased evaluation of SfD programming within Canada<sup>39</sup> as well as a need to identify if these SfD initiatives can successfully promote self-determination in FNMI communities.<sup>49</sup> For example, Levermore has suggested that most evaluations in SfD are conducted in an exclusive and non-participatory manner, do

not capture enough depth of information to represent the full program context, and apply methods that do not take into account the worldview of the participants and other stakeholders.<sup>48</sup> Scholars have also argued that there is a lack of understanding of underlying mechanisms within the SfD evaluation literature.<sup>22</sup>

In order to address the identified gaps in the SfD literature, Kay recommends the use of qualitative research that better captures individuals’ perspectives, complexities within programming and contextual dynamics related to community and family.<sup>24</sup> This research addresses the shortcomings within the field of evaluation in SfD since it uses a qualitative approach that examines both context and implementation. Researchers have suggested that interventions that promote empowerment for FNMI youth may promote a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood through the provision of manageable developmental challenges and opportunities to strengthen cultural identity.<sup>50</sup> Although youth leadership has been identified as an important component of effective PYD programs,<sup>43, 44</sup> researchers have identified that there is a need to better understand the mechanisms and processes that promote positive outcomes within the programming context.<sup>51, 52</sup> Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present a formative evaluation of the YLP component of the PLAY programme that examines contextual challenges and strategies for implementation success. The objective of formative evaluation is to examine implementation issues within programs that are in their early stages of implementation in order to apply the findings to improve programming rather than to examine programme



outcomes.<sup>53</sup> Recognizing that this programme was recently initiated, the goal of this research was to explore contextual issues that affect operations within the YLP to identify what is working well and areas in need of improvement. Furthermore, this research examines the perceptions of community members who are responsible for the implementation of the program.

## METHODS

### Context

This study is the result of a research partnership that was initially developed between RTP and the University of Ottawa. The project was initiated when RTP approached the University to invite the researchers to implement an independent program evaluation. Since there was no funding from RTP to support this partnership, the researchers sought and received independent research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the largest funding source for research in social sciences in Canada. Throughout the research, RTP supported the logistics of data collection and the researchers provided intermittent feedback regarding the findings and provided recommendations for programming. Researchers have recommended the use of research advisory committees in guiding studies with FNMI communities.<sup>54</sup> Researchers have also recommended the inclusion of Elders in the design and implementation of these evaluations.<sup>55</sup> In FNMI communities, Elders serve as teachers and role models and are considered to be significant community members because of “their symbolic connection to the past, and for their knowledge of traditional ways, teachings, stories and ceremonies.”<sup>56</sup> In order to support the research partnership, a research advisory committee was created that included representatives from RTP, researchers at the University of Ottawa, Elders and external indigenous researchers. The purpose of the committee was to improve the relevance of the research designs and to ensure that community needs were addressed in the process. There were four ethical principles created to guide this study: 1) relational accountability, 2) respectful representation, 3) reciprocal appropriation, and 4) rights and regulations. The principle of relational accountability acknowledges that the researchers must be responsible for maintaining transparent and respectful relationships with everyone involved in the research. Respectful representation involves a commitment to understanding community perspectives and engaging them in knowledge production. Reciprocal appropriation speaks to the importance of ensuring that mutually beneficial outcomes are achieved through the research. The principle of rights and regulations states that the

communities must maintain ownership and control of the data. This research has also been reviewed and approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board.

### Evaluation Design

A qualitative design was used in order to capture context, description and understanding of staff perceptions.<sup>46</sup> This exploratory approach is particularly important since the programme is youth and community-led, thus specific goals were expected to shift based on context. In addition, researchers have suggested that in evaluation with FNMI communities, it is impossible to disregard cultural context as it is “critical to valid inference; programmes can be accurately understood only within their relationship to place, setting, and community.”<sup>57</sup> Recognizing that the programme was in its early stages of implementation, a formative approach was used so that the data collected could be used to improve programming rather than demonstrate impact.<sup>53, 58</sup> LaFrance and Nichols suggest that evaluation should emphasize continuous learning and focus on process as it is complementary to indigenous ways of knowing; as such, “evaluation should reflect insights and understandings captured in the sense of becoming.”<sup>55</sup> More specifically, this study follows a constructionist epistemology since the aim is to better understand the individual perspective of the CMs on the programme. This perspective assumes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction<sup>59, 60</sup> and reflects the surrounding context.<sup>46, 61</sup>

### Participants and Procedures

The lead researcher attended five Community Mentor Trainings and one Youth Symposium to recruit participants and conduct interviews. Interviews were conducted with 11 CMs and one Elder. Five of the participants were female and five of them had been involved with the programme for more than one year. The participants worked in 14 different communities from across Ontario (one individual worked in three different communities and another worked in two communities). Four of the communities were designated as Southern, six as Northern, three as fly-in and one was unknown. Each Community Mentor Training was attended by an Elder, and he was interviewed during one of the trainings. Interview participants are identified by codes (Community Mentor = CM, Elder = E).

As described above, the data for this research were collected at the trainings and symposiums with a broad cross-section of CMs. In these circumstances, there was no individual community that was involved in the research. For non-geographically based evaluation, researchers have suggested

that it is important to recognize service organizations as a community of interest.<sup>62, 63</sup> In this case, our “community” was the collective of CMs who had their own shared perspectives, values and experiences that brought them together.

The qualitative method used in this study was semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews are useful in this context because they are a method to capture individual perceptions of the programme, including their experience and understanding.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, story-telling is valued as a traditional FNMI method of sharing knowledge.<sup>64-66</sup> LaFrance and Nichols suggest that it is important to tell the program’s story when doing evaluation within indigenous communities and they include story-telling in their Indigenous Evaluation Framework as an essential element.<sup>55, 57</sup> In line with this tradition, qualitative semi-structured interviews have the capacity to capture stories and detail-rich information. An interview guide was developed and included questions regarding the overall programme context and structure (e.g. please describe the youth you are working with), perceptions of success during implementation (e.g. what was your greatest success?), challenges experienced during implementation (e.g. did you experience any difficulties implementing the programme?) and community involvement (e.g. are there any other people/partners/organizations who should be involved in the future who could make the programme better? Who?).

In order to make sense of the data, a thematic analysis was used.<sup>67</sup> This process involved six phases that include: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming and 6) producing the report. During the familiarization phase, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts and observation notes in order to have a relatively clear idea of the data set as a whole. During this stage, notes and highlights were made in order to keep track of initial impressions and ideas. Initial codes were created using QSR NVivo. Through an iterative process, codes were organized into larger themes based on inter-related meaning and the themes revised and re-organized based on reflection and review. To enhance methodological rigour, analyses were reviewed by the University of Ottawa research team. Furthermore, the researcher presented the initial analyses to CMs in order to obtain their feedback regarding whether the results were capturing their experience accurately. Themes were revised and refined based on the feedback received.

Many researchers have argued against the rigid application of fixed criteria in judging qualitative research methods.<sup>68, 69</sup>

Sparkes and Smith recommend the use of flexible lists in order to judge the value of qualitative research.<sup>70</sup> This strategy allows researchers to identify criteria of quality during the research process, and as such, these criteria “act as a starting point for judging a certain kind of inquiry, but these may not apply on all occasions and other criteria can be added to or subtracted from them depending on the circumstances.”<sup>68</sup> Tracy’s eight “Big-Tent” model represents a universal set of criteria that can be applied to complement the research context.<sup>69</sup> The model also distinguishes between indicators of quality and best practices. Applying this relativist perspective, our research demonstrates several strengths highlighted within this model, including credibility, significant contribution and topic worthiness. Credibility is demonstrated through thick description. The elaborate narratives provided by the CMs provide a comprehensive description of their experiences and the programming environment. Credibility is also reinforced through the member reflections provided by participants regarding their perceptions of the initial analyses and feedback regarding effective knowledge exchange and utilization opportunities. Evaluation research is uniquely situated to provide a significant contribution. The process of evaluation allows the close examination of contextual issues and the ability to provide concrete and practical recommendations both for the programme under study, as well as for related interventions and initiatives. The criterion of topic worthiness is fulfilled since the subject of this research is of such considerable importance. Given the issues that face FNMI youth today, including elevated rates of suicide in many communities,<sup>17</sup> exposure to violence against women,<sup>2, 71</sup> and criminal involvement,<sup>72, 73</sup> it is critical to examine the best ways to alleviate these disparities. Recognizing that community empowerment has a considerable relationship with youth suicide<sup>17</sup> and that these issues require community-driven solutions,<sup>74</sup> it is of crucial importance to examine community-based leadership programming to identify what works and what is in need of improvement in order to share lessons learned to support program and policy development.

## RESULTS

The analysis resulted in the development of two overarching themes. The first relates to strategies used to implement the programme that were perceived as being successful and the second related to challenges experienced in implementing the programme. Within these two overarching themes a number of sub-themes arose which are described in more detail below.

## Strategies for Success

The CMs talked at length about the different strategies that they believed helped them to have a successful programme that the youth enjoyed and to overcome barriers. Success was subjectively defined by the CMs and based on their understanding of the context and what they perceived as contributing to an effective and efficient programme. Some of these strategies included creating individual strategies for empowerment, identifying new contextually adaptive activities, integrating their community culture and making local connections to enhance the programme. The strategies are broken down into the following six themes: 1) designing youth empowerment strategies, 2) being creative and adaptable, 3) being a positive presence, 4) applying experiential learning techniques, 5) balancing the integration of culture with youth voice and 6) identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community.

### *Designing youth empowerment strategies*

The core philosophy of this programme is leadership and the development of independence among youth and their communities. Many of the CMs endorsed this approach and developed their own methods to promote youth empowerment. One CM talked about how the youth develop confidence through the skills that they learn and by taking ownership for the program.

*It's easy for me to do it all, but then they have to do it. And do the work for it, and then overall it makes them feel that they are capable of doing better things. (CM2)*

Many CMs were able to individualize their support based on the needs and strengths of individual youth. They created learning opportunities that were at the right level of challenge so that the youth can develop important leadership skills and experience. For example, one CM described how his participant played the Easter Bunny at their community Easter event, a role that was challenging, yet achievable for her:

*She was huge and that's just a little bit out of her comfort zone. Like she does have that personality, but yeah, she did and she did it really well. (CM10)*

Many of the CMs also discussed the importance of respecting the youth and the importance of providing an autonomy-supportive environment. As one CM shared:

*I'm not forceful or aggressive with anything that I try with people. Because it's for people's own choice to do what*

*they want, right? So even when it comes to the youth... I just always keep in mind, equality and respect. There's nothing I can make you do that you don't want to, but if we have the respect for each other, you might give it a try. (CM1)*

The Elder also discussed the importance of the programme being youth-led, rather than based on standardized best practices from abroad.

*I would be worried about [RTP] and be troubled about them if they say, 'Well here's what we're going to do: We've got programming from the international corporation ... this is how we did it in other countries. This is how we're going to do it to you.' Oh shit. Here we go again, some experts found a way to solve our problems and make our kids healthy and brighter and happier... We need to include them everywhere... the children, we have to hear them and be sensitive to them. (E)*

### *Being creative and adaptive*

CMs also found ways to build on what they had in order to meet the needs of the programme. For example, one CM did not have access to any kind of traditional sports facilities, so they managed to create a hockey rink out of a garage:

*There's an industrial garage that's not being used, that doesn't have a door. If we put boards up, it's not going to be legal size but we'll have an indoor hockey rink. (CM5)*

In another instance, a CM described using the fire hall to host some of his activities:

*"We don't have any kind of community center or anything rec-based or anything... when there is actually something like the garage of the fire hall, they take the trucks out and they'll have a community meal in there." (CM1)*

Most CMs appreciated that they were able to adapt the program to fit their community needs better: "this new [module] is actually better because it's more flexible" (CM8). Another CM stated,

*This is how I achieve my goals, using 75% [of the programme module] and maybe adding 25% of my own thoughts because I know how my community is and you know best for your community, you know... It's where you have to become creative in how to make it work. Without you putting in your imagination to what you're doing, it's not going to work. (CM6)*

*Being a positive presence for the youth*

CMs also found creative ways to overcome some of the behavioural issues they were aware of with youth in the community. Most of them had an empathetic approach that recognized that these youth may be dealing with very stressful and serious situations in other parts of their lives and that these behaviours may be the result of trauma. This is the approach one of the CMs uses that she described:

*Give the kids the trust and the security that you will be there for them, even if it's outside of the time frame that you're supposed to be there... Go above and beyond what they expect from you. (CM5)*

Similarly, another CM emphasized the importance of really being there for the youth and supporting them.

*I just come from a very positive way too. Like, just want to be as positive as I can for young people because you don't know what kind of story they're coming from, or how the day went or whatever... So whatever I'm doing, I just try and be really positive, like I'll use quotes, I'll use songs, I'll use whatever, pictures, stories. I'll invite people in who are funnier than me. (CM7)*

Some participants were struggling with other mental health issues, such as anxiety. This CM shares how he tried to support the youth by helping them cope with anxiety and helping them better understand their surroundings:

*They have anxiety problems, I've noticed. So things that are a potential danger for them, cause them to have pretty severe reactions... And so I do a lot of talking with them and explain things to them when it comes to that. Like they walk down the road, and they'll hear something in the bush and be scared of what it is, not knowing what it is. But if you can explain it to them and tell them, 'This is your land, your home. There is nothing here that you should be scared of. This is for you.' (CM1)*

The Elder who was involved with the programme also emphasized the importance of being open-minded and compassionate with the youth in order to learn from them.

*Being open is really important. Being non-judgemental, being kind and compassionate... Be patient and tolerant and most importantly, do it with a sense and spirit of love and compassion. (E)*

*Applying experiential learning techniques*

One way that CMs made the programme more appealing to youth was through finding activities that provided education without creating a classroom environment. The CMs felt that many of the youth did not feel comfortable or would lose interest in typical educational activities.

*My kids were interested in the fun games and the fun team-building exercises and you know, drawing or something. They just didn't want any bookwork, you know? "Please don't give me any paper to write on!" You know? That sort of thing. (CM2)*

Another CM stated,

*It's their choice to run it, rather than me telling them what to do. Because I don't want to make them feel like they're in high school, where they're actually told what to do, how to do it. I like to give them the choice, where they feel like they can do what they want, but responsibly. (CM4)*

As a result the CMs talked about how a lot of the lessons were intermingled with other activities or provided within applied or experiential contexts without using traditional learning resources.

*When we're cooking and stuff, and they're prepping, we'll bring up the things that are in [the programme module] with them, and just have like open dialog. But we're touching on all the points that it says in the sessions... but it's not sitting down at a table... it's more about the evening and getting it done and they don't even realize that they're talking about it. (CM9)*

*Balancing the integration of culture with youth voice*

Sometimes the CMs had to feel out how the youth felt about involving culture in the programme activities. They had to create a safe space to allow the youth to explore their traditional culture. As a result, CMs used different strategies to bring culture into the programme:

*Whenever we do some activities, I always ask the kids, 'Do we want to do something cultural?' And if they're 'Yes, but we don't know how to do this' and I say 'Oh well, we can find a way to do that'. (CM2)*



Another CM commented that,

*Some of the young kids, may not follow their parents or grandparents walk or ways, but they're going to become adults. And to me, I believe in giving them choice, allowing them, educating them, let them know the knowledge of both ends, and they'll have to make their choices. Pushing one or another on to them is just, you're asking for a push back. (CM3)*

Another CM noted that,

*I like to make them comfortable. So, whenever I do an event or a gathering or a meeting with them, I kind of like set the stage, so I'll have snacks, I'll have water, I'll have music playing that I think they like, or like my favourite music to make me comfortable because I get nervous too and I'll, if I need it, I'll bring my bundle, so, my smudge, my feather, that kind of stuff. (CM7)*

Building on youth cultural interests is also an important way that the CMs increased youth participation and created momentum in the programme. Connection to the land and nature is an important value within FNMI cultures, so many of the youth were interested in more traditional outdoor sports rather than team sports. Some community programmes were built around those kinds of activities:

*It clicked really fast with the boys because we're all hunters and fishers and stuff like that so they really looked to me to, to have those kinds of conversations and stuff like that. So it happened really fast once they knew that we have similar interests, it was snap of a finger and they were interested... So that's what I'd like to do is organize a hunting trip in the fall time and maybe some kind of fishing derby as an intergenerational event in the summertime or something like that. (CM1)*

Another CM said of activities,

*The other thing is to get outside... I grew up outside and I just loved it, so I just want to try and bring that back, so all of my gatherings or meetings or whatever, there's always something to do outside. (CM7)*

*Identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community*

Ideally, the programme was developed to involve and engage the community along with the youth participants. CMs were able to achieve this in a variety of ways. Some were able to find volunteers who contributed to the programme in important ways. Others were able to develop

partnerships and coordinate with other programmes and institutions within the community to make the programme stronger and more integrated. This is an example of how one of the CMs involved law enforcement to create a more positive relationship between the police officers and the youth in his community:

*In our communities, I try to involve the police ... most of our kids growing up have been either ripped away from their home or seen a parent or their family member, or even, on the street were taken away by the police and not understanding. So they get the idea that they're only there to make them sad or hurt them or take away my family or myself. So I involve them with all the activities, and they're great. And now the kids are building that relationship and that comfort zone to say 'hey this isn't a bad person, they're here to protect me.' (CM3)*

Involving other programming has been another way that CMs create more diversity in their programme, engage with other community organizations and integrate cultural learning. For example, one CM would involve other local organizations to come and facilitate sessions that included content that supported youth empowerment and that were aligned with program objectives, such as the local YMCA or the National Child Benefit program:

*We've just been bringing in people and making time for whatever else, like sexual health or the gambling awareness or traditional teachings. Just a whole slew of things. (CM10)*

CMs also found community members who were willing to help with the programme on a volunteer basis, by contributing their time and skills to help with community events or regular programming. Here is an example of how the school bus driver provided transportation support within one programme:

*With the after-school programme, these kids didn't have a way home. ... And the education director said, 'Yeah, don't worry about the fuel and the cost, if [the bus driver] is willing to do it, we're going to do this.' (CM3)*

Sometimes, CMs were able to engage volunteers on a more casual basis. They would find people who were willing to offer their help occasionally, without getting closely involved with the programme:

*I've had people offer their support when they can or when it's convenient for them and when it was during an event and they can help do a clean-up or something physical like that. Like they don't mind lending a helping hand and*

*they're just not interested in running programmes in the community and so I don't ask too much of them but I'm happy for the respect that they show me. (CM1)*

## Challenges

There was a range of different challenges that were perceived to have affected the implementation of the programme, but there were several that were more salient and widespread among the different communities. The three themes that emerged under challenges were community diversity, social issues and staff burn-out.

### Community diversity

Since this programme is being implemented across 88 different communities that range tremendously in context and character, there were many instances where the programme could not be transferred to a new community without having to make substantial adjustments. These differences had a great impact on operations and created a fair amount of stress for staff and CMs. One example that was often mentioned was the diversity in culture among the communities. Many communities really valued traditional beliefs and customs, while other communities were not as comfortable with them. This meant that programming could not always be communicated in the same way and activities needed to be adapted to fit the context so that participants and community members could see value in the programme:

*Each community is so different, right? And that's what I find a challenge too sometimes, because I work in three different communities, and all three are so different. You know, some follow cultural ways, and others do not. So you know, it's hard sometimes to keep track of everything. (CM2)*

Even within communities, there was a huge range in the representation of cultures making it important for CMs to acknowledge differences within their own groups:

*They could be Lakota, they could be Cree, they could be anything... there's a lot of awakening going on when it comes to the culture, there's a lot of spiritual awakening... People realizing the things that we need to do as a people to re-vitalize our way of life, our culture and that's a huge part of it, is our ceremony, and everybody seems to be finding it in a different place. And so when we come back to our own home, it creates a bit of a barrier in the fact that we don't have the same teachings, we don't have the exact same ceremonies. (CM1)*

Another variable that demonstrated a huge contrast between communities was geography and infrastructure. This influenced the operations of the programme since not everyone had the same access to resources. Some of the communities that were served by the programme were located within urban centres, while others were on reserve. Some of the more remote communities were only accessible by boat, airplane or ice road. As such, programming had to be planned around unpredictable weather conditions:

*We have the ice road and we don't know when the meltdown is going to come and everything like that. (CM3)*

Another CM noted,

*We have the limitation of how remote we are. We don't have a school, we have portables. We don't have a gym. We don't have a ball field. We don't have a soccer field. We don't have a hockey rink. (CM5)*

These differences in infrastructure created a barrier for some programmes in terms of finding a consistent venue for sports and other activities. This forced some CMs to run their programming out of fire station garages and public health building basements, while others had a full community centre available with a gym and youth room equipped with state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment. For some CMs, the scarcity of venues within their community created logistical problems when they were trying to run activities.

*The biggest problem would have to be, venue, a place to have the activities. Because there's always people that are wanting a gym, struggling to get a place. Or if we want to do this, and there's something going on, that they don't kind of overlap us, they'll chose the bigger. (CM4)*

Some CMs were even struggling with community crises related to flooding and sewage problems conflicting with their scheduled programming: "We were supposed to do a basketball tournament, and these guys were going to run it, but that's when the evacuation happened and so we had to close everything." (CM11)

### Social issues

Another challenge for program implementation concerned social issues that can affect FNMI communities; these are the problems that have been linked to colonial policy and practice, including domestic violence and family breakdown, widespread addictions, lateral violence and behavioural issues.

*Knowing the events and evolution of our people, as aboriginal people. You know the assimilation policy, the Indian Act, the residential schools, and all these other things that happened, alcohol and drugs, family violence, family breakdown... There's some alienation, some fragmentation. It's not a cohesive community family here. (E)*

A CM noted that,

*There's so much bullying happening right now. There's suicides that take place, there hasn't been any lately, thank goodness. You go on Facebook and adults are attacking other adults. (CM2)*

There is also a lot of stress placed on the CMs because many of the youth themselves are dealing with issues related to addiction and mental health:

*Some of the activities would draw certain things out of them that would bring out an emotional response that could be of a negative perspective that maybe the youth could have... and I did witness some of that. You know the way some of the youth were acting. Their emotions start going, so that's when I had to go and talk to the health professionals and then start talking to psychologists and NADAP, like for drugs and alcohol and get a better understanding of the behaviours. So I took mental health first aid because of that. So I felt that some of these things were inappropriate for me to go out and do it, right? Because I might draw something out that's not supposed to be there. (CM9)*

Because of the prevalence of social issues within the families, it was challenging for the CMs to engage with and involve the parents and other family members:

*We have a lot of, the generation of ... 25-40 are the ones most affected by the OxyContin. ... so they, for the most part, have lost their children in some way shape or form... So grandparents at the age of 65 are raising 10 year old kids. Usually they all live in the same house because we don't have enough houses but they're legal guardians a lot of the time... These are the kids that are in my programme. And a lot of those grandparents don't speak English, they only speak Cree. (CM5)*

This created problems increasing participation with the youth, finding volunteers and developing greater community involvement. There was also a lack of trust because of past experiences with western institutions and programmes. This created barriers in developing relationships and increasing

involvement:

*Our communities are so closed up to the Westernized, because of the fact that they've been hurt so many times - we're talking residential schools, sixties scoop... they're still healing. So, we need to bring these places and these organizations to a lot of them, to build the trust... Sometimes you forget, they won't even go to people in their own community, because of their fear of the confidentiality being broken. (CM3)*

### *Staff burn-out*

Since there are so many demands placed on the CMs, many of them feel very overwhelmed within their role. This stress is related to the challenge of meeting all the requirements related to the position, as well as all of the barriers they need to overcome in order to get their programme running smoothly. As a result, many CMs were unable to remain in their position and this affected the staff turnover rate. One of the CMs discussed some of the issues he was experiencing, including difficulties obtaining outside funding and completing the administrative work:

*We try to do as much possible, of getting out there, getting other funding and whatnot. [RTP] support us greatly with everything, but it's the financial part. Because we're so busy doing programming, event planning, working, you know, so many hours, that trying to do our own grants, is difficult. Like, my normal week, is usually from 8:30 in the morning to 6:30 at night. That's just with the lessons during the day, and the after-school programme. That's doesn't include me going afterwards and doing the extras of doing my paperwork, and getting things, or doing the extras to make sure that the kids are set up. (CM3)*

One CM was working with three different communities and described the added strain of driving in dangerous conditions along with all the programming:

*So I get up early in the morning and I spend all day there, and I don't do just RTP program, we'll do Lacrosse programming and I'm also a Skate Canada coach, so I'll do Learn To Skate sessions. So I utilize everything in one day, to do it. But it's the travel. That's what really drains me, is the travel, because it is so much. And winter road conditions... icy conditions, accidents all over. And that's what you have to face so, it's not just the stress whenever you go to the communities, because they're really thankful that I'm there, but it's just getting there and having pulled muscles up here because you're just like this, eh? [demonstrates gripping the steering wheel]. (CM2)*

Another CM discussed how many of their colleagues feel the same way about the pressure of the job:

*That was a big thing at our last CM training, we had a sharing circle with an Elder and it just came out, like, blah, everyone's so tired and over-worked. Everything is just, go, go, go, I mean, it's just like so much to do. (CM10)*

## DISCUSSION

This paper describes an evaluation of contextual issues associated with the implementation of a SfD leadership programme across diverse FNMI communities. A number of successful strategies that the staff employed in order to improve programme implementation were identified. These strategies were related to adapting the programme to meet participant, community and contextual needs. However, a number of challenges encountered while implementing the programme were also noted. Below is a discussion of the results of this study in regards to previous research as well as recommendations for both researchers and practitioners working in the SfD field.

The main approach of this programme is to develop leadership for youth and communities. The results regarding youth empowerment strategies highlight the importance of this strategy since many of the CMs felt the leadership component was a key to the success of the programme. They felt that this approach helped to get youth engaged and facilitated the achievement of their goals. There is a wealth of research that highlights the benefits of promoting leadership within PYD programs.<sup>43, 44, 52, 75</sup> Relatedly, researchers have identified that FNMI communities with more influence over their own community affairs exhibit lower youth suicide rates than those communities with less agency over community affairs.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Hayhurst and Giles suggest that within the field of SfD, the state discharge of authority over programming may create more opportunities for FNMI communities to employ self-determination.<sup>39</sup>

The descriptions of balancing culture with youth agency also reinforce the importance of leadership development. The CM narratives highlight the importance of community agency over a standardized emphasis on historical cultural tradition. This suggests that contemporary community values and experiences should be acknowledged and valued whether they align with traditional practices or not. This is substantiated by other research in the SfD field that underscores the importance of participatory approaches that highlight local perspectives. Hayhurst, Giles and Radforth applied a participatory strategy that employed sharing

circles and photovoice with young FNMI women participating in sport programming at an urban friendship centre.<sup>49</sup> Although they found that cultural practices were important, their findings also indicated the need for the FNMI youth to be empowered and to highlight their specific perspective. Kay also underscores the importance of advancing local knowledge and how this can help to decolonize SfD research.<sup>24</sup>

One way that SfD leadership programmes for FNMI youth can foster leadership is to create more advancement opportunities for community members such as the youth participants and CMs. This is also an important way to strengthen internal organizational capacity regarding indigenous knowledge. In other studies, researchers have specifically recommended recruiting indigenous staff within organizations that aim to promote leadership with FNMI youth.<sup>35</sup> In addition, new recruits from the mainstream culture would benefit from indigenous knowledge and sensitivity training as part of their capacity development. Cultural sensitivity training has been identified as an important organizational need within other FNMI research as well.<sup>10, 35, 76</sup>

Another notable strategy that was implemented is to deviate from a western pedagogical style and toward a more experiential learning environment. Researchers have identified that experiential learning is a preferred learning style for First Nations youth<sup>45</sup> and that classroom-style learning experiences can be less applicable to life on reserves.<sup>77</sup> Researchers recommend that hands-on and group-work related activities should be maximized in order to enhance the students' learning environment.<sup>78</sup> Much of the programme curriculum is centred on energizers and play-based activities that allow learning to be facilitated in an informal and fun setting. This style of learning has been identified as a best practice with experts in child and youth participatory engagement.<sup>79-81</sup>

The results of this study highlight the importance of being creative and adaptive to contextual needs. The CMs found many creative ways to adapt community infrastructure to incorporate activities and events. They also shared strategies they used to adapt the program to meet community needs. These are important considerations that can be applied when implementing other SfD leadership programmes within FNMI communities. This strategy has been supported by research. For example, researchers have suggested that contextual influences may lead to different developmental outcomes and that sports programming should be tailored to meet individual youth needs.<sup>82</sup> Parent suggests that in order to better serve FNMI youth, programmes and services



should incorporate youth perspectives and cultural contexts.<sup>83</sup> Recognizing that some FNMI youth may have a stronger affinity for traditional sports such as hunting and fishing, rather than typical western team sports is an important consideration to make in programme design. For example, outdoor adventure-based programming has been demonstrated to be successful in increasing the resilience of FNMI youth<sup>33</sup> and is reflective of the FNMI traditional value of connection to the land.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, being a positive presence for youth was identified as an important way to help youth to get engaged in the program. There are numerous studies in PYD programming that have identified having a caring adult as a fundamental program component.<sup>43, 52, 84-88</sup> This approach would be particularly important when dealing with youth who may be coping with mental health issues and might be exhibiting negative behaviours or experience anxiety in new situations. The CMs emphasized the importance of taking an optimistic, compassionate approach and providing a secure environment that creates the space the youth need to feel safe and welcome.

Many of the perceived challenges identified by CMs are supported by research evidence. Researchers have recognized that there is considerable diversity among Canadian FNMI communities.<sup>12</sup> According to Statistics Canada, there are more than 600 First Nations bands, speaking 60 different languages.<sup>1</sup> FNMI youth continue to be exposed to elevated rates of domestic issues, including increased rates of maltreatment in child welfare cases<sup>3</sup> and high rates of spousal violence.<sup>2</sup> Finally, evaluations of other strengths-based programming for FNMI youth have encountered similar challenges such as obstacles related to engaging parents and difficulties making life skills transferable for youth.<sup>77</sup>

## Recommendations

Based on the feedback related to the challenges, there are several recommendations that can be made. Since CMs are feeling overworked and stressed in their roles, it is important for them to receive more support. This can be facilitated through several strategies. Resources can be developed and tailored to provide more targeted and relevant information for each community. For example, success stories for northern communities dealing with cost savings challenges can be compiled and applied to these specific situations when they arise in future. Many FNMI youth are suffering from historical trauma.<sup>13, 89</sup> As a result, many CMs felt unprepared to help the youth cope with the distress they were experiencing. Identifying community supports who

can help the youth in these areas along with offering some introductory training in managing trauma.

Technology has been used in very innovative and participatory ways in order to enhance mental health outcomes with youth.<sup>90</sup> Since many youth, staff and community members are familiar with and use smart devices and social technology, these tools could be incorporated to facilitate programme operations and improve efficiency. This programme is being implemented across a wide geographic area and this technology could be used to bring CMs together more regularly. It might also be useful to partner CMs who are experiencing similar contexts and challenges. This strategy would be particularly effective for new CMs who could benefit from the knowledge of more experienced CMs. Setting up forums and encouraging regular communication among CMs might help them to feel more supported and to develop informal knowledge as in Communities of Practice.

Another way that technology could be used to support CMs in their roles would be to automate some of the administrative work. Targeting and automating monitoring that can be rolled up to programme staff more easily would reduce the workload. For example, one strategy would be to use photos taken during group nights to create a headcount and facilitate attendance monitoring to capture participation rates. Dictation software (which is available on many mobile devices) and online survey software would also make monitoring and evaluation more efficient.

There are several recommendations that can be made for other evaluators working to examine youth programming in FNMI communities. Relationship building is a very important step in the research process.<sup>63, 92</sup> It is a necessary pre-requisite for identifying individuals with in-depth knowledge and experience in the programme. It is also important for adaptations in data collection procedures. For example, interviews can be refined so that the terms and language used are more relevant to the context and orientation of the participant. Ongoing engagement with community members is also essential for having a meaningful understanding of the experiences of those connected with the programme. Since each community was so different, it took time to be able to develop a clear picture of the dynamics within each situation.

It is also very important to collaborate with other indigenous leaders.<sup>57, 92</sup> This research benefitted from the insight and creativity contributed by FNMI leaders, which includes Elders, indigenous researchers both from within and outside of the research team, and indigenous leaders within the RTP

organization. These individuals made some of the best contributions to the design, execution and conceptualization of this research. Many of the insights that contributed to the findings were achieved through in-depth discussions and reflection with the Elders and FNMI colleagues. Many of the community connections were also made through the direct support of FNMI leaders within RTP.

When working with communities, it is important to look for unique opportunities to contribute through ways such as research capacity-building<sup>10</sup> and grant-writing.<sup>63</sup> In this setting, the CMs had different needs depending on their situation. Some needed help with grant writing within their fund-raising efforts. Others needed support finding programme materials or exploring outside events that would benefit their programme participants. It is also important to identify the unique needs of the CMs regarding knowledge exchange. Taking the time to discuss and identify the content and format of the findings that would be most useful for them would be a key component in developing an effective partnership for programme evaluation.

In communities with an interest in outcome evaluation, it is recommended that programme staff pilot an adaptable measure that was developed for FNMI youth such as the Aanish Naa Gegii.<sup>93</sup> This would allow them to examine developmental changes created by the programme. Using photovoice and participatory evaluation methods to examine a handful of events more in-depth would be a useful way to get a stronger understanding of youth perceptions and experiences within the programme. Moreover, this method has been used successfully with other FNMI communities<sup>94, 95</sup> and youth.<sup>93, 96</sup>

### Strengths and Limitations

This formative evaluation was responsive to local needs since it placed a focus on community member perspectives.<sup>24</sup> Given that indigenous cultures value the tradition of story-telling as an important method of sharing knowledge,<sup>64, 65</sup> this research emphasized story-telling through the use of rich narrative descriptions that detail personal experiences within the programme. Finally, this research benefitted from the engagement of an advisory committee composed of Elders, indigenous researchers and indigenous programme staff. They all played a pivotal role in guiding the research development, providing feedback regarding methods and offering insight to improve contextual understanding.

This study is limited as it examines programme perceptions rather than direct observations. Future examinations of

programme operations would benefit from a more comprehensive description of process issues including information regarding participant exposure, partnership development, community infrastructure and programme activity logs. Developmental evaluation is an approach that is well-suited to complex and changing environments as it allows for innovation in methodology.<sup>58</sup> Researchers have identified this is a valuable approach to evaluation within contexts that use youth engagement to guide programming<sup>97</sup> as well as within community-based research with FNMI youth.<sup>98</sup> This research would have benefited from using a developmental evaluation approach; however, since the evaluators were working externally, there was not as many opportunities to work closely with the communities and to collaborate on a timely basis. Finally, this evaluation was designed with the intention of applying the findings to practice, both within RTP and for other organizations implementing leadership programs for FNMI youth. Reports were provided to the organization on a regular basis and presentations of the findings and recommendations were provided throughout the term of the research. However, as a result of high turnover in leadership as well as difficulties maintaining pace with program operations, the findings were not applied to the extent that was originally intended. In the future, it may be beneficial to implement strategies that focus on capacity-building and that integrate research and evaluation within internal monitoring practices. Consequently, organizational infrastructure and knowledge can be improved, increasing the opportunity for the utilization of findings.

### CONCLUSION

This research applied a qualitative approach that highlighted local community member perceptions and examines both programme context and implementation. Results indicated that there are many challenges that must be navigated in order to successfully implement Sfd leadership programming for youth within FNMI communities. Recognizing this adversity, frontline staff have developed creative strategies to overcome programming obstacles including making adaptations to the programme, creating community partnerships and supporting youth empowerment. These are important strategies that are applicable within Sfd programmes designed to enhance leadership for FNMI youth. If other organizations incorporate these components, they may be able to create a programme that is truly integrated with and led by the community. Lessons learned may also be useful for researchers and evaluators working in these contexts.

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