

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



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“...the success of the initiative may have been less around teaching youth to be leaders and more around coming alongside who they were becoming” (p. 13).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research explores the experiences of Indigenous high school students who participated in a youth **Leadership Pathway** program in Regina, Saskatchewan.

The program was designed to support Indigenous students in their learning, leadership development, and transitions beyond high school. The students take leadership, cultural arts, land-based, outdoor, and physical education courses, then work as mentors in the Growing Young Movers after-school wellness programs at the māmawêyatîân centre, a local community centre. The Leadership Pathway program was created through a partnership between Growing Young Movers Youth Development, the City of Regina, and Regina Public Schools, integrating school credit, training, certifications, and work experience.

This study focuses on understanding how Indigenous youth make sense of their identities, education, and futures while participating in a culturally-grounded leadership program.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place at Scott Collegiate, a public high school in Regina.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about Indigenous high school-aged youth, specifically the 10 students in grades 10 to 12 enrolled in the Leadership Pathway program.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

This project centered the **four Rs** for engaging Indigenous learners: **respect**, **relevance**, **reciprocity**, and **responsibility**. Relationship-building before and during interviews, returning narratives to youth for review, and positioning youth as knowledge holders were **key ethical practices**.

The researchers used **narrative inquiry** – a method of listening to and analyzing personal stories – to deeply understand students’ lived experiences in and outside of school. Narrative inquiry is relational, recognizing that people’s stories are shaped by social, cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives. Researchers and participants lived alongside each other over time, making the researchers part of the inquiry; researchers regularly joined Growing Young Movers sessions, building relationships through shared play and mentoring rather than only through collecting data.

The mostly non-Indigenous research team engaged in **reflexivity**, a process of interrogating biases, assumptions, and experiences to understand how they influence perspectives and practices. They began with autobiographical reflection, mapping their own histories with school, sport, and leadership to surface assumptions and power dynamics. Ongoing reflexive practice aimed to prevent researchers’ stories from overtaking youth voices.

Each youth participant took part in four rounds of **conversational interviews**, lasting 30 to 120 minutes, that were **audio-recorded** (with consent) and **transcribed** (written out word for word). Interview planning was iterative; the team met after each round to adjust focus based on what youth shared. The first interviews asked youth to share key moments in their lives, visually and verbally. The second and third interviews explored school, physical activity, leadership, and transitions between school and the Growing Young Movers programs. The fourth interview invited forward-looking ideas for making the Leadership Pathway program more respectful and relevant.

Researchers wrote **narrative accounts** for each youth and shared drafts with participants to check whether they had been heard accurately. The research team met to read across all accounts and identified **cross-cutting themes**.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The article distills **four main pathways** that Indigenous high school students want adults to consider. Together, these pathways illustrate how a school–community leadership program can sustain **identity, wellbeing, and future opportunities**.

i) Identity making: Students described the shift from being seen as ‘just students’ to seeing themselves as **leaders, mentors, role models, teachers, and older siblings**. These identities were nurtured most in *intergenerational* spaces where they worked with younger children, not only in traditional classrooms.

ii) Play as educative: Play and movement in the Growing Young Movers program supported **stress relief, happiness, and coping** during hard times. Youth contrasted this program with competitive phys-ed classes and valued a **caring and inclusive** kind of play that focuses on **belonging and relationships** rather than skill or performance.

iii) Recognizing youth as knowledgeable: Students brought deep knowledge from family and community life, such as **caring** for siblings, **empathy** after loss, and **navigating hardship**. When schools recognize this knowledge and create roles through which youth can contribute it, students **feel valued** and more able to **sustain** themselves in school.

iv) Shifting trajectories collaboratively: The Leadership Pathway program and paid mentoring roles helped students **imagine different futures, practice workplace skills, and feel pride in contributing** to their community. Youth also noticed visible ripple effects, such as younger children feeling **supported** and community symbols of the program that **strengthened local identity**.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research highlights a **strengths-based, culturally affirming** approach to youth development. Rather than focusing on what Indigenous youth *lack*, the Leadership Pathway program emphasized **relationship-building, identity exploration, and culturally relevant learning**, helping participants feel more **connected, confident, and supported**. *Relational, place-based programming* that integrates school credit with paid, community-embedded mentoring enables young people to develop **leadership identities** and a **sense of wellbeing**.

The study calls for youth workers to move beyond viewing programs as tools for ‘fixing’ young people to **spaces of co-creation that honour youth’s lived experiences and community strengths**. This means designing initiatives that align closely with students’ cultural identities, personal histories, and everyday realities. **Programs should reflect the voices, values, and stories of the youth they serve**. When activities draw upon young people’s existing knowledge, traditions, and community connections, they foster a **deeper sense of belonging and pride**.

Youth workers can strengthen this sense of belonging by involving young people in every stage of program development, from identifying priorities to evaluating outcomes, so that programs feel **co-owned** rather than imposed. Incorporating *intergenerational mentorship, inclusive play, and opportunities for leadership* allows students to experience themselves as capable contributors rather than passive recipients of support. Ultimately, such approaches reposition youth work as **relational and collaborative**: a practice grounded in respect, shared learning, and empowerment rather than correction or intervention.

Q Lewis, B., Dubnewick, M., Ryba, T., Kannenberg, B., Hopper, T., Lessard, S., & Naytowhow, J. (2022). [*A narrative inquiry into the experiences of Indigenous high school students enrolled within a youth Leadership Pathway*](#) (Project 310). Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching.