

# Community and Culture as Foundations for Resilience: Participatory Health Research with First Nations Student Filmmakers

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## Abstract

This article describes a participatory action research project that brings together teachers and students from three First Nations education programs with researchers from the Centre for Youth & Society at the University of Victoria for the purpose of researching health and wellness among Aboriginal youth. Using the methodologies of participatory research, students identify topics that are of concern to them in the area of health and wellness. They plan, research and develop a video presentation on their chosen topic using digital video as a tool for research and communication of their findings. This article focuses on how such an approach to research contributes to building resiliency through the development of relationships that foster a connection with community and culture. The article describes the way the project has enhanced participants' relationships with their communities, across generations, with diverse groups in urban settings, and with their sense of self, and culture.

## Keywords

Resilience, health, education, participatory research, First Nations, youth, video, community partnership, relationship, culture

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the critical social factors found to affect health is that of control.<sup>1</sup> This refers to the amount of control people have over their lives as well as the supportive relationships they have that protect them from isolation and disconnection. The nature of post-modern urban life is fragmentary. Urban Aboriginal populations living in such environments find they are often isolated, scattered and mixed so that they identify with many nations or tribes<sup>2</sup> rather than a single unique one that is their own. This article explores how a participatory community health research project addresses the disconnection experienced by many urban Aboriginal youth. In the pages that follow, we describe some of the outcomes of the Traditional Pathways to Health project as it relates to the development of relationships that foster resiliency through a connection with community, and the ongoing development of a strong cultural identity.

## METHODS

Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, is a

gathering place for a rich mixture of Aboriginal cultures. The classroom diversity represented within this project is broad and includes nine different First Nations across three separate program sites designed to address Aboriginal education. As part of their programs, teachers have partnered with researchers from the Centre for Youth & Society at the University of Victoria to participate in Traditional Pathways to Health, a collaborative research project designed to promote health and wellness among Aboriginal youth. The project is part of a larger federally funded Community Alliance for Health Research (CAHR) called "Healthy Youth in a Healthy Society." Funded through the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, that overall project brings together researchers and community members from a variety of backgrounds to address the topic of injury prevention among young people. In the Traditional Pathways to Health project, students, as co-researchers, choose a health topic or wellness issue that interests them. They then plan, research and develop a video with their message that they later present to their community as a way of sharing what they have learned. This approach is in keeping with conceptions of participatory research that see the presentation of research

findings taking a number of non-traditional (i.e., non-print) forms.<sup>3</sup> Another aspect of participatory research that this project draws upon is building capacity within the community and drawing upon the strengths and wisdom held by the participants themselves.

What we mean by health in this project is what the student researchers define as health through their research process. Classroom teachers, school staff and university researchers work with students to facilitate and support the process, which is incorporated into community education programs. It exemplifies one of the ways in which urban Aboriginal people in the Victoria area are working to create resilient individuals and communities.

### **Programs**

Three First Nations teachers in the Victoria area have participated as partners in the Traditional Pathways to Health project. Each runs a course or program that operates slightly differently within the provincial school system to meet the needs of students, which are not being met in the mainstream system. First Nations communities, school communities and the wider community have developed these programs as part of the effort to increase the opportunities and chances for academic success of urban Aboriginal students. All three programs have similar goals and philosophies that ultimately relate to relationship and resiliency.

Careers and Personal Planning at Victoria High School has a course option for Aboriginal students that focuses on making connections with elders and other Aboriginal role models in the community to facilitate their career planning process. The Westshore Centre for Learning and Training has developed a separate First Nations graduation program to assist adult and youth learners. A strong cultural focus engages students in many activities and relationships with Aboriginal artists, poets, dancers, and writers. Provincially required courses are taught in a supportive setting through relationships developed and built upon trust and respect. In First Nations Leadership 11 at Esquimalt Secondary School, the philosophy of the course is based on the belief that students are capable learners, deserving of respect, and are leaders in their lives. It embraces the understanding that First Nations values and beliefs are essential to the understanding of self and others as a leader.

### **Research project**

The specific objectives of the Traditional Pathways to Health project are:

1) to facilitate student investigation of topics that they

perceive to be of importance for the promotion of healthy living and injury prevention

2) to develop strategies for injury prevention and health promotion among young people that are based upon health concerns identified by the young people themselves,

3) to develop leadership skills and research expertise among young people through participation in conducting research about health and wellness, and

4) to develop an understanding of the manner in which participatory action research can be used to develop school and community-based initiatives for health promotion.

The typical procedure in a site project involves the university researchers being invited into the three different First Nations programs described. Initial visits allow everyone to get to know one another, discuss the nature of participatory research, and decide whether they would like to take part in the process of researching and making a video about health and wellness. Permissions and protocols for research (classroom, school, university, community) are discussed with the students. Ethics are linked to and are a reflection of respect, which is a guiding principle of the project. The notion of informed consent<sup>4</sup> is emphasized as being an integral part of the research process, as is the idea that such consent must be included when students go out and ask people to be interviewed as part of their own research process, even if, or especially if, it involves family members and friends. Exploring topics and planning the video-making process is the next step.

Through large and small group discussion, as well as one-on-one conversations with their teachers and the research team, students develop their ideas around health and then plan how they might get the message across to their audience. Students are encouraged to work with partners or in groups, and organizational skills are emphasized as they prepare to go out into the field and gather information and video footage for their projects. Decisions about who to interview, what questions to ask, where to videotape, and even the desired types of camera shots and angles all come into play during the planning process.

Technical instruction and practice with the digital video cameras are provided by the university team near the beginning of the process so that students are aware of the kinds of things they might want to consider as they plan their videos (i.e., lighting, sound, camera shots, music, interview techniques). Logistical issues concerning equipment use and signout as well as arranging for interviews and getting to interview locations are

largely handled by the students, their families and classroom teachers, though the university researchers sometimes assist with this as well.

Once the students have gathered their video footage, they downloaded and edited their work using computers. In this project, we use iMovie software on Macintosh computers. The program is straightforward and easy to use, which enables the students to concentrate on the information they have gathered and how they are going to put it together to present their message. This part of the process is very intensive and time-consuming.

In one setting (Esquimalt Secondary School), the team has made weekly two-hour visits over the course of two school years for a total of 120 hours of direct contact between the students as community partners and the university research team. The other sites (Victoria High School and the Westshore Center for Learning and Training) have each had a total of 60 hours of direct contact between the university team and the students and teachers in those sites.<sup>5</sup> Another 60 hours were added from January to June of 2004 at the Esquimalt and Westshore locations.

Twenty-eight student videos have been produced in the first three years of this five-year project. They cover a variety of health-related issues including smoking, drug use and addictions, drinking and driving, suicide, diabetes, the protective effects of culture, cultural dancing, language, healthy lifestyles, participation in sports, racism and discrimination, healing circles, traditional foods and medicines, cultural understandings (wisdom and advice), and relationships.

As part of the participatory structure of this project, student videos have presented to the community in a variety of ways. In their leadership class, students at Esquimalt Secondary School hold a potlatch where they present their video and publicly acknowledge someone in their life who have been of importance to them. Victoria High School and the Westshore Centre for Learning and Training, the other two partner sites, have video screenings for invited family, friends and community members. "These opportunities provide an occasion for students to assume a leadership role within their family and community as they highlight issues that affect the health and well-being of those within their community."<sup>6</sup> Community members respond publicly to the student presentations and give them feedback on the work they have done.

Students also present their work at other venues. Seven presentations with university researchers have been given to a variety of interested university classes as well as at an international conference. Additionally, university

and/or community partner researchers have given seven conference presentations at the provincial, national and international level. Whenever possible, students are included in these presentations as well to provide an opportunity for them to speak to questions about their work.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data consists of 28 individual and collaborative student-produced videos, 29 interviews conducted with the student video-makers, and interviews with the three teacher partners. All interviews were recorded using digital video and have been gathered over the past three years, usually at the completion of each school year. As a preparation for analysis of the interview data, video editing software (Final Cut Express) was used to sort and categorize interviews into sequences of questions about the different stages of the project (i.e., planning the video, the process of video-making, reflection on the video's message, and intended effects). These edited video sequences were then burned onto eight DVDs with each interviewee's answers accessible through the use of indexed chapter markers on the individual DVDs. The data sets were then distributed to research team partners for analysis.

For the purpose of this paper, three members of the university research team viewed the interviews and student videos to develop general categories and themes based on interview content. We focused on interview questions that related to the idea of resiliency (see the questions provided in the endnotes referencing specific quotations). After analyzing the respective interview data, each of us did preliminary writing on emerging ideas such as the connection between health and wellness, and culture (including traditional practices such as healing circles, knowledge of self in community), physical activity, building understanding, and passing knowledge across generations. As part of a second pass through the data we viewed the interviews and student videos in a more focused manner, specifically with the topic resilience in mind as a kind of sensitizing concept. We were interested in looking for connections to elements of resiliency as reflected in student interview comments. The notion of relationship came out in many of the interviews; thus our concentration on viewing the data with relationship and resiliency as our focus.

### **Resilience**

... [the experience of doing this video research project] did sort of bring my conscience back

about some of the things I sort of just left behind. I know I've gone through a lot myself and sometimes it doesn't really seem like something that's worth holding onto. I don't know. There's always a reason. I figured I came back for some reason. Just trying to hold my family honour, cuz that's what it's all about.<sup>7</sup>

This quote is from a young adult participant whose video, *Evolution of a People*,<sup>8</sup> is a powerful tribute to the producer's own Kwakwaka'wakw culture and to all Aboriginal cultures as the foundation for personal identity and strength. If the video was the reason he came back, as he suggests, it is a tribute to his own persistence and resilience as well as his willingness to work to change the persistent social and economic inequalities encountered by his people.

Resiliency can be defined as "the ability to overcome adversity."<sup>9</sup> Educators look to the resiliency research to support youth in responding appropriately to a broad range of life experiences. "Resiliency is an approach that expands our thinking about students, schools, and communities beyond problem identification and resolution to strengths identification and actualization."<sup>10</sup> Six key elements of resiliency identified by Henry and Milstein (2004)<sup>11</sup> are positive connections and relationships; nurturance and support; purposes and expectations; clear, consistent and appropriate boundaries; life-guiding skills; and meaningful participation.

The participatory approach of this project fosters the development of positive relationships and connections amongst the researchers and community members. The relationships between people along with the shared values that link activities, programs, institutions, and communities, are what help us to know who we are and how we fit in with those around us. For the three Aboriginal teachers who are the community partners in this project, relationship is central to their programs, their students and themselves, particularly in this urban setting where many of the students are living away from their home communities. The support and nurturance engendered both in the classroom programs and out in the communities through project work help to develop positive connections with others. In addition to developing relationships, it is important for students and others to learn to both give and ask for the support they need.

The expectations of the First Nations' education programs as well as those of the research project are clear, consistent and appropriate to the needs and abilities of the participants. The school-based programs and the

participatory research project provide a safe and secure place for students to be and work within. All three programs focus on leadership and career planning, which is consistent with the objectives of the Traditional Pathways to Health project. Life-guiding skills need to be developed and applied through experiences such as those that happen throughout the course of this research.

The purposes and expectations of the project are such that students choose and prioritize their own interests and focus of research, which further motivates growth and development of resilient people. Additionally, student, community and university researchers participate in this project in ways that enhance meaningful collaboration with their families, friends and communities. This process enables us to work together rather than in isolation, to contribute or offer something to others, and to, in part, satisfy the sense of responsibility that we all have to give back to the environments and communities that have nurtured and supported us. The approach differs from typical ways of researching health in that it emphasizes a holistic, relation-based framework that not only allows individuals more control over their own health and wellness, but actively engages them in the construction of that wellness by identifying and nurturing strengths. The concept of resilience used in this paper is one that is grounded at a cultural level and is its focused on the relationships that exist between community and culture across generations and geographical settings. In the sections that follow we describe these aspects of the project's outcomes.

## RESULTS

### Relationship and interaction with others

In an interview with one of the project's teacher partners, Frank Conibear reiterates what he identifies as one of the goals in the First Nations leadership class he teaches. For Conibear, a central concern is that of relationships in community and how that gets developed through involvement with the project.

I think success in an ideal way is how we set it up. It becomes difficult to say, "Okay where is success?" Because that's the ideal, and I think it's more measured in the process of having the students go out and interview different people. Coming up with questions and making that time, beginning a dialogue that's there. And I don't know if we can measure that in the true sense of research. If we really want collaborative research

in the community, it might not be about the product. We can use that to say we've done something, but the real work is, and the real research is, that interaction that the students have with whomever they decide to interview... you know, it takes a long time to get them just to that process. And they still do a public thing [i.e., a presentation], but it might not be a finished product. But they've opened up some doors and I think that's the whole point of the research. Because it isn't about the research... it's about what we can do in our communities.<sup>12</sup>

Conibear acknowledges the standard view of research, and articulates his own appreciation of the ways in which the collaborative research has enabled students to become involved in, and make a contribution to, their own communities. The two other teacher partners also express beliefs about the importance of relationships within communities to strengthen student and personal identity. John Lyall writes,

... So, what is Aboriginal Knowledge to me? Primarily, it is a way of viewing the world. It includes maya'ghila (Respect): respect for yourself, respect for your family, respect for your community, respect for your local surroundings and environment. It includes knowledge transfer, the readiness to accept teachings from your elders and environment and willingness to pass this on through the generations. It includes knowledge, knowledge of your local environment, knowledge of the language, songs, dance, and culture of your peoples. It includes modern dynamics; a capacity to recognize that we are a dynamic people, that we exist in a world different from our ancestors, a capacity to recognize that we must co-exist and survive in a multicultural world. It includes the simple fact that we must recognize how critical it is to keep our teachings alive, that this is our very survival.<sup>13</sup>

Corrine Michel's vision for the project is clear:

I wanted them [her students] to connect with the First Nations community in a positive way. Connecting with community members is important in establishing a sense of identity, especially for urban Natives. Many of the students I work with are disconnected from their cultural

heritage. Some of them are living thousands of miles away from their territory, some have never met their First Nations family members, and some are connected with their culture but are in the city to attend school. They miss being in a space where it is safe to be who they are.

I hoped that they would meet people in the community and perhaps make some connections that would last. I can only speak for myself when I say that there is a profound sense of aloneness that lives inside a First Nations person who is estranged from her family, community and culture. Relationships with other First Nations people helped me to accept who I am, to feel proud of who I am and to understand who I am. When I agreed to participate in the project, I hoped that the students I have the privilege to work with would benefit from this contact with First Nations role models.<sup>14</sup>

Student researchers talk about the importance and value of the research project in ways that resonate strongly with their teachers' goals of connecting with community members and building relationships. In their interviews, the students say that they learned from the people they interviewed as they listened to their stories. They heard their point of view, and got to know them better: "...just spending time with my family I guess, I valued the most from [making] this video. And actually seeing them eating the stuff makes me happy. That they're carrying it on, carrying on—the food."<sup>15</sup> This participant's video, *Seafood for Life*,<sup>16</sup> shows how seafood is collected, prepared and shared within her own Pacheedaht culture.

### **Relationship with other generations**

The importance of relationships across generations and the notion of carrying cultural knowledge and traditions forward are reflected in several of the students' comments. The following is in response to the question, "How has this project made a difference in your life?"

... what I kind of came out with most, is how culture is really important to carry on because, it's kinda, it gets covered up by all the media stuff and all the fancy big cities even. It just, it's not as present as I think it used to be and I think it should always be present. I think it's... [pauses]

Culture defines people.... It should be up front; it should be one of the first things people have, on their mind. I don't know, it's just, yeah; it's an important thing to remember.<sup>17</sup>

"...there were a few people from outside our community who mentioned taking it [his video] and presenting it outside. Just being able to do that, is probably the most valuable thing."<sup>20</sup>

Another participant is concerned about the path her sister is on and wants to pass on some of the things about health and wellness that she has learned while making a video about First Nations soccer. Others hope their videos will influence younger (and older) children in positive ways by encouraging them to become more active, to follow a traditional diet, to stay away from drugs and alcohol, and to be aware of the help and resources that are available in the community (i.e., healing circles, friendship centre, diabetes and suicide information, drumming and dance groups, sports organizations).

Personal growth, self-confidence or relationship with oneself are themes that weave throughout the project. Near the end of the term, a participant who had initially said he was not going to do a video decided to do one, and chose to ask people he respected in the community about health and wellness. He talks about the influence his involvement in the project has had on his own well-being.

Well, before this, I wasn't exactly, I didn't exactly know where I was in life. I had dreams, you know, I thought they were impossible, so I gave up on them. I've always said my dream is to make a difference for First Nations people, and I still want to do that now. I feel that I can do it.<sup>21</sup>

### **Relationship and diversity in urban community**

The video project was also seen as important because it enabled people to look at the diversity and relationships within an urban community. Through his research and interviews for his video, one student participant sensed that there are still tensions and inter-cultural rivalries held onto from the past. He points out that in the urban environment, there seems to be some recognition of the need to get along since people are seeing each other every day. Another student videomaker says that the experience of going through the project helped him "to honour and cherish other people's feelings."<sup>18</sup> His work and the video he produced involved working closely with his own group of Esquimalt singers and dancers as well as a non-native ballet company. Several others talk about strengthening the relationships with families and friends as being the most important thing they learned from the project. One student found that the process of doing the project was a good way to make new friends and get more involved in sports, which in turn helped him slow down on his smoking, drug and alcohol use.

Others are inspired to learn. Experience doing research in the community and making their own videos has given student researchers the motivation and incentive to learn more about their families and communities, their culture and their language. One grade 11 student has never been to the reserve where she was born. After completing a video on the advantages and disadvantages of living on and off reserve, she wants to go and find out for herself what it is like, "on reserve, with my family. So, [this project has had] a big influence."<sup>22</sup>

### **Relationship with culture**

Many participants talked about and produced videos that reflect the importance of culture and practising one's culture as a way to stay healthy. "When you're involved in your culture, you're a healthier person."<sup>23</sup> They talk about health and wellness as something that is balanced, holistic and reflects how you are in the world.

### **Relationship and reflection**

Feedback from the community was particularly valuable to participants and gives them an opportunity to reflect. Comments made at community presentations had a big impact on their self-esteem and sense of self-worth: "...they thought it was good and I didn't really think it was that good, but, it was great what people were saying."<sup>19</sup> Another student videographer was quite surprised and excited by the response his video caused:

It [culture] brings you spirituality... See now, that's something that's hard to explain unless you experience it, right? So, that's why I'm encouraging people to know their culture, because it does keep you alive. And in your heart, when you walk, when you, just, when you always know you have somewhere you can go to, I think that keeps you alive.<sup>24</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Keeping alive. Definitely a prerequisite for and determinant of health. For these student researchers, knowing and practicing their culture helps to ground them in a strong sense of who they are and where they have come from. For the students and the individuals they interviewed, culture is an integral part of their existence as Aboriginal people. In the words of one of the interviewees in a student video on culture, "It is our *gxleena*, our medicine; it is what makes us strong... If it were not for my culture, I would probably not be here today."<sup>25</sup>

From the perspective of promoting and improving resiliency, it stands to reason that schools and educators should be doing everything in their power to make sure that all Aboriginal children have the opportunity to learn, know and practise their culture. We can and are working together towards this goal. Partnerships such as ours that include researchers, teachers, community members, and students demonstrate some of the ways that resiliency can be improved by building relationships amongst them. "Resiliency thinking concentrates on why things do work, can work, and will work."<sup>26</sup>

Nurturing, supportive positive connections and relationships are working for the students and their teachers. The fact that community members were willing to be interviewed and gave their consent to be in the students' videos speaks to the value they place on their relationships with the student researchers. As community members, as family members and as members of their culture, they gave their time and knowledge to help students research and learn about health issues that concern them. Student researchers and community members shared knowledge in ways that resulted in a new and/or stronger relationship between them, as well as a video to be shared and discussed. Involvement in this project fosters the development of positive connections and relationships in many ways. It also fosters resiliency by providing caring environments, high expectations and purposeful support, powerful and effective instruction, and ongoing opportunities for meaningful participation.<sup>27</sup>

### Methodological innovation

At the same time, it is important to appreciate that this project does not conform to standard research practices. In a typical research project on the health of urban Aboriginal youth, the students would be the object or subjects of study. They might be contacted to

participate in a survey, or maybe even a focus group, though it is more likely that they would be mailed or given a questionnaire to complete. Though epidemiological studies serve a useful purpose in medical research, this is not our goal here. In this study, participatory action research approaches are used to involve, engage and ultimately empower student researchers with knowledge that is culturally based, and crafted, in part through their own agency. Students are encouraged to ask questions that help address health issues they see as impacting the youth of their communities. They define and control what they research and how they go about doing it. Using their newly acquired skills as video-makers, they craft the message they want to convey. Focusing on their own families and communities, students create resources for looking at, discussing and managing health. The way in which the research is conducted, along with their developing video and computer skills, enhance the ability and capacity for students to take control of their own health and wellness through processes of knowledge translation. This project is also a contribution toward the ongoing processes of decolonization<sup>28</sup> in which Aboriginal peoples replace failed attempts at assimilation with relevant cultural knowledge and practices that are grounded not only in resiliency, but in thousands of years of tradition and survival.

## CONCLUSION

Students and teachers alike speak about having the confidence and desire to make a difference in their communities. Making such a difference is related to having another vision for education, health and research while recognizing that the persistence of social inequality and systemic oppression undermines students' full learning potential. By enhancing participants' relationships and building resilient individuals and communities, the Traditional Pathways to Health project takes a step towards meeting this vision. It offers a vision that aims to question, critique and work towards institutional change.<sup>29</sup> It is a vision that is about knowledge, relationship and working together. Participating in this project is making a difference.

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