

Understanding the Role of Cultural Continuity in Reclaiming the Identity of Young Indigenous Women

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ABSTRACT

Statistical representation of young Indigenous women in Canada presents an alarming picture of adversity characterized by addiction, pregnancy, and academic underachievement. Using Photovoice as a vehicle for community dialogue and education, the goal of this project was not to further the literature that examines the limitations of young Indigenous women, but to examine their strengths and their resilience. The project intended to document the lived experiences of young Indigenous women and comment on youth-identified issues and responses to the challenges experienced by Indigenous girls residing in urban centres. The level of insight and maturity demonstrated by the photographers was astounding; these young girls were able to consider their own circumstances within the broader context of family and community. Further, they examined their circumstances critically in relation to the historical consequences of past generations. In doing this, the photographers, rather than getting trapped in a cycle of negativity reminiscing about past wrongs, created opportunity for positive change and raised hope for this generation.



Literature Review

Research indicates that colonial policies related to residential schools—the erosion of language and cultural traditions that lead to cultural continuity—have led to a loss of cohesion and identity in Indigenous communities and that this has had an impact on the family (MacNeil 2008). Recognizing the devastating effects of colonization on their ancestors, Indigenous youth across Canada, in a special committee of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, identified a sense of loss of culture and identity and saw this as an important factor in healing (Thura 2000). Literature identifies the devastating effects of cultural loss on Indigenous youth and there is consensus among these young people that they are “suffering from a loss of culture and a loss of family” (Morris 2007:137). The youth believed that



reconnecting with their culture would be benefit them on a community, individual, and familial level (MacNeil 2008).

Cultural continuity is the ability to preserve the historical traditions of a culture and carry them forward with that culture into the future, and it is closely linked to the concept of cultural identity (Brown 2003). Cultural identity has a major influence on our confidence and self-esteem. However, because of years of colonization and assimilation there is a disconnect from the cultural values and traditions espoused in Indigenous communities (Morris 2007). Cultural disconnection and lack of cultural continuity creates a loss of confidence at the individual level in understanding how to live life and make decisions (MacNeil 2008). Today, loss of culture means that a number of Indigenous people do not acknowledge their Indigenous identities. Ortiz speaks of how people feel “confused . . . ambiguous and uncertain” (2011: 285), and many who do try to acknowledge their Indigenous identity feel invalidated. MacNeil (2008) agrees that the colonial policies which have led to an erosion of cultural continuity have created a loss of cohesion and identity in Indigenous communities and families.

This loss of cultural continuity and identity has taken a particularly devastating toll on Indigenous youth. In Canada, suicide rates for these young people are up to 36 times higher than for non-Indigenous youth (MacNeil 2008) and are said to be higher than that of any culturally identifiable group in the world (Chandler et al. 2003). The main cause of this high rate of suicide is often thought to be related to socioeconomic factors (inadequate income, education, housing, healthcare) but this does not explain why, when all socioeconomic factors are equal, Indigenous youth are still at higher risk (Chandler et al. 2003).

Chandler et al. (2003) and MacNeil (2008) identify cultural continuity as a significant explanation for this increase in suicide rates. This is mainly because loss of cultural continuity leads to a loss of self-continuity or self-identity and a loss of self-confidence (MacNeil 2008). Chandler et al (2003) identify adolescence as a time of heightened risk of suicide because it is a transitional time developmentally and is also a critical time for the development of strategies that promote cultural continuity. Specifically, the study by Chandler et al. found that “First Nations communities that succeed in taking steps to preserve their heritage culture and to recover some measure of control over [their] institutions . . . are also dramatically more successful in insulating their own children against the risks of suicide” (2003: 115). One strategy to promote cultural continuity would be to provide youth with access to the arts which are important in their culture. Indigenous youth

have identified returning to traditional values, and reconnecting with cultural teaching as beneficial (Morris 2007). They also identified the importance of having positive Indigenous role models from their family and community (Brown et al. 2007).

The literature clearly demonstrates that Indigenous youth have a vision for their future and understand what is needed to create future success. Young people feel they have something valuable to contribute and feel that their contributions should be included in responses designed to address their needs (Brown et al. 2007; Morris 2007). Further, youth feel that in order to address current issues they need to return to traditional values, reconnect with cultural teachings, and relearn Indigenous languages (Morris 2007). Finally, youth identified the importance of having positive Indigenous role models from their family and community to provide support and guidance (Brown et al. 2007).

Project Overview

This project employed a Participatory Action Research (PAR) method called Photovoice. Photovoice, a recent development in action research, is a grassroots community assessment tool that enables local people to identify and represent their community through the use of photography as the medium for communication (Strack et al. 2004; Wang 1999). Photovoice enables local people to participate actively in the research process using cameras to record their views on their own communities. By using photography as the catalyst for both individual and community change, Photovoice allows participants to document their own worlds, discuss issues with policy-makers, and become active agents in social action (Wang and Burris 1997).

Recruitment and Participants

Participants learned about the project through recruitment posters and word of mouth. Participants in the study were girls and young, urban Indigenous women between the ages of 15 and 18 residing in the city of Prince Albert. The participants had to self-identify as Indigenous, where Indigenous was defined as those individuals who identified as being First Nations, Non-Status, or Métis. In the end, there was a core group of six young Indigenous girls and women aged between 16 and 18 who completed the project and were dedicated not only to its creation, but were active in sharing their pho-

tos in the community and at peer-reviewed academic conferences in Canada. Of these six, four identified as First Nations and two identified as Métis. Four participants were employed part-time, one was a single parent, and they were all currently attending school. Of the six, four were actively involved in cultural activities such as dance and in sewing traditional regalia and star blankets.

Data Collection

When the group of photographers was solidified, the researcher/facilitator presented an initial prompt for taking pictures: “Tell me what it means to be a young, Indigenous female in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.” Discussions around the initial theme were undertaken as a group to stimulate ideas and provide examples of possible photos. The Photovoice process involved discussion around the group-identified themes on key issues, as well as on how these issues were personally defined for each photographer and how they could be represented on film.

The young Indigenous women’s Photovoice group decided on an art exhibit to keep the project relatively informal, increase opportunity for audience members to interact with the photographers, and give equal opportunity for all photographers to contribute to the final project. The participants were given the opportunity to choose several of their pictures to be displayed at the various venues we attended. Although specific photos were chosen for the display, all of the photos taken by the participants were used as data.

Data Analysis

When the photographers felt they had exhausted their photographic possibilities, the group met to discuss the photographs. Following Wang and Burris (1997), the photographers were involved throughout the three-stage process that provided the foundation for analysis: selecting the photographs they felt best represented their community’s needs and assets; contextualizing or telling stories about what the pictures meant to them; and codifying or identifying issues, themes, and stories that emerged. First, photographers selected their favourite photographs and discussed why they felt these photographs were most significant. Each photographer then told the story behind the picture to the group that included the other photographers and the researcher. We followed McIntyre’s suggestion that the photographers rely on instinct when choosing their photos and interpret and analyze photos with the following questions: “What did the photographs mean to them?

What was the relationship between the content of the photographs and how the women perceived the community? How did the women see the photographs as reflecting issues that are salient to them as women in their community?" (2003: 53).

In the second round of analysis, the group members chose two to four photographs and organized them into topic groups. As suggested by Lykes (2001), the participants collected their ideas, identified similarities across photos, and constructed holistic analyses of the clusters of photographs through open dialogue. Following Wang and Burris (1997), the young women and girls then codified the issues, themes, and theories emerging from their photographs and the discussions that arose from them.

With the permission of the Photovoice participants, all group discussions were audio-taped and the tapes were later transcribed. The written transcriptions were then taken back to the group to ensure that the transcriber had accurately captured the information they were sharing with the group. When the transcripts were accepted as accurate, the researcher then analyzed the data using a computer-assisted analysis program, Atlas ti. This analysis was then compared to the manual analysis completed during the group discussions.

Results

The initial purpose of this project was to use Photovoice as a tool to enable young Indigenous women and girls to express their ideas about important issues, community programming to address youth needs such as housing, education and social services, and public policy in words and photographs. The participants were presented with the task of not only identifying the issues that have an impact on Indigenous girls and women but also of recommending potential changes to program and policy that would benefit the community. As such, the photographs and accompanying discussions were categorized into youth-identified issues and youth-identified responses. Further, in line with the holistic position characteristic of the Indigenous perspective, both issues and responses were examined within the parameters of community, program, and personal considerations.

Youth-identified Issues

The participants were keenly aware of the issues that affect Indigenous youth in the city. Impressively, they were able to see past individual issues

and identify those community and program issues that influence the well-being of Indigenous youth collectively. The young women were able to draw parallels between issues that occurred at a community and program level and the effect that these issues had on the well-being of Indigenous youth. The participants felt that several issues were at the forefront of those community concerns stereotypically attached to young Indigenous women. In fact, they felt that many of the personal issues they experienced were the direct consequence of specific systemic community issues. They readily acknowledged that historic systemic occurrences provided the foundation for current issues affecting young Indigenous women. These incidents—residential school and the consequent involvement with the foster system—have bred racism along with the stereotypes and assumptions attached to Indigenous people today. The young women felt that these occurrences, which still take place today, led to generational experiences similar to those lived by their mothers and grandmothers. These systemic occurrences created challenges for overcoming the adversity experienced by Indigenous communities, families, and people.

The Effects of Residential School on Generations

While discussing the struggles experienced by young Indigenous women the participants stated that residential school was an important consideration in understanding the circumstances of young people today. They believe that the effects of residential school can still be felt today not only because of the impact they have on the well-being of survivors but also because of the disintegration of Indigenous families and communities particularly in relation to learning how to raise and support future generations. These effects were seen as generational in that youth are learning and living their lives in accordance with the examples set by their families and communities. The participants felt that the cycle of adversity was a difficult one to challenge. This adversity included experiences with addictions, abuse, and poverty, and in areas like academic achievement and employment. The participants¹ felt that because of historic and generational issues their lives started out being encumbered and sometimes it was easier “just to live the life that you know.”

You can't be raised by an alcoholic, like there are people who have been raised by alcoholics and grown up to be good people, but those are stories you put in books and don't happen as often as you'd like to think. Then there are people who are raised by alcoholics, and become alcoholics because it's what they know or that their kids go on welfare because their parents are on welfare. (16-year-old Dee)

Racism/Stereotypes/ Assumptions

The participants stated that many of the circumstances in their lives were the result of the stereotypes and assumptions society makes about young Indigenous women. These stereotypes were thought to exist because of the racist attitudes that lowered the expectations that society had for the future of young Indigenous women and girls. The young women felt that these stereotypes and assumptions influenced how people interacted with them and how they, in turn, viewed their place in society.

And then as soon as they told some girls that I was native, they basically stopped talking to me and that feels bad once you know that someone doesn't want to talk you because you're actually Aboriginal, they automatically assume, hey, you must be a really bad person. (16-year-old Erin)

The participants felt that negative stereotypes and assumptions limited their ability and desire to succeed. They claimed that it was difficult to try to make positive changes when "other people are like, well, you know in the back of their mind, I don't know if she really can do this" (Dee). The doubt they felt from external sources and the expectation of failure superseded their internal belief in their ability and they admitted that this did not motivate them to improve their situations; they felt that recognition of accomplishments and outside belief in their ability was essential to personal growth and development.

Cultural Concerns

The photographers were in agreement that connecting and re-connecting to traditional teachings was essential for Indigenous youth, especially girls and young women. However, many of them talked about the struggles they experienced in trying to learn about their culture from "not looking the part" to finding urban resources that shared traditional teachings with the youth. In addition, many of the participants discussed feelings of shame connected to their culture because of the negative stereotypes that seemed to be attached to identifying as Indigenous.

Figure 1. Tall worn totem



[This is a] far away view of the most prevalent symbol of our culture in this city. From a faraway view point, it looks tall, standing proud against the elements. Closer, you'll see it's getting worn down. People don't bother to take a closer look at things that look 'fine'. They don't see we're rotting from the outside and the inside. If we took a closer look at our culture, we could all strive for a better future. (Erin)

Systematic Destruction of Culture

The photographers shared their disquiet about cultural disconnect and were concerned about the lack of available cultural programming in urban centres. They felt that it would be beneficial for Indigenous youth, especially females, to have a traditional understanding of women in society. The photographers felt that traditional teachings emphasizing women's strength and importance in society, as well as respecting their power as women would be valuable lessons for Indigenous youth. However, the photographers stated that programming with this emphasis was difficult to find in urban centres. Further, locating trusted and respected Elders to provide these teachings in urban centres was a challenge.

I don't think, without Elders, I don't think we can, like, our race our culture can survive. Let's face it, there are very few young people who are interested in culture now a days. And with Elders like, no matter of how bad of a kid you are, almost

all native kids looked up to their Kokum or their Mushum, almost all of them did, unless they didn't have reason. (17-year-old Cherish)

Shame about Culture/Race

The participants shared experiences of sensing stereotypes and racism in society from other youth, at school, and in their workplaces. Exposure to stereotypes and racism had a detrimental effect on their identity as young Indigenous women. The photographers identified feelings of shame with their Indigenous culture, stating that they tried to dismiss their Indigenous heritage in order to free themselves of stereotypes and racist attitudes in society. The shame felt in identifying as Indigenous had detrimental effects on their esteem and confidence because the young women internalized the negative stereotypes and assumptions made about them. As Erin explained,

When it comes to cultural identity, you always feel obviously bad about yourself and you get a kind of bad feeling for being who you are and for being what you want to be. . . .

[This photo is of] a young girl with moccasins on but her pants are basically hiding them, and that's because some are ashamed of their culture and some don't want to be Aboriginal that's why you see blond hair blue eyed native with light brown skin, it's because they got their hair blond put in blue contacts.

Figure 2. Hidden



This picture is a little more symbolic—a girl wearing moccasins, which are half-covered with some new slacks. This could represent past events or how young girls of our culture don't really practice the tradition anymore. (Erin)

Youth-identified Responses

In discussing community issues associated with young Indigenous women, the photographers were able to reflect critically on responses that would be beneficial both personally and in the programming made available to them. They felt that programming would be more effective in identifying those areas that would help them succeed on a personal level, and in gearing community response to meet those needs.

Personal Voice

Impressively, the participants discussed areas for personal growth and the support they needed from the community in order to make positive changes for themselves. The photographers spoke at length about the adversity they had experienced in their lives and felt that they had much to teach others based on this. The participants said that society was unwilling to listen to lessons they had to teach about current issues and the strength needed to address them. For this reason, many youth relied on means of communication that are described as defiant and disrespectful within the community. All the photographers took pictures of graffiti in the city. However, to the photographers, graffiti was a means of communicating the negativity that surrounds their lives. For 15-year-old Rachel, graffiti was a “way to speak out, it’s like look I was here look at me, I did this, I’m alive. It’s just a way to show that’s somebody is living.”

Able to Talk about Issues

The participants felt that the adverse experiences in their lives gave them life lessons to be shared with others—a connection to the issues of other youth that gave them wisdom if they could get past the emotional turmoil. The photographers felt that discussing their experiences openly was an important part of the healing process and an essential part of their own personal growth. Their ability to discuss issues of abuse, abandonment, anger, and fear removed feelings of shame and guilt and the young women felt they were in a prime position to help others deal with similar issues.

A lot of my friends were abused. And we openly discuss it you know, 'cause, I'm the one that started it, like I just started talking about how I grew up and like, they're like, how can you talk about that, how can you just tell people you've been molested or how can you just, or like, how am I going to get over it, how I am I going to you know, heal, or how am I going to move forward if I don't start talking about what I've been through. And that kind of helped them and they've admitted things. (16-year-old Carrie)

The ability to think critically about their lives was an important ingredient for personal change. The participants all described moments when they needed to think seriously about the events of their lives, how those events affected them now and what they needed to do to alter the course of their lives. The young women described a process of life-changing experiences and self-reflection that forced them to redirect their lives.

Self-reflection

The participants shared experiences that proved to be life altering for them. The outcome could have been different had the young women dealt with the issues in a different way but they all took the experience as a challenge and created opportunity for themselves. For some of the participants the initial circumstances, including teen pregnancy, exposure to violence or parental conflict, were extremely difficult. Other situations, such as graduating from high school, were positive. All experiences, however, provided the young women with the motivation to choose a different and often positive path for themselves. As Dee said about her daughter,

I think, um, she's, you know everything happens for a reason. I think she's there to motivate me more. And now I don't have any excuses to fail. You know, she's always pushing me. Just knowing that I have to be there for her, because I remember when I was little not having my mom and how it affected me. And just the environment I was in when I was with my mom. So it motivated me to not put her through what I went through. . . .

Yes [her grandfather] was really proud of me. I don't think any of his kids graduated. I can't think of anybody in my immediate family that graduated.

Taking those challenging experiences and creating opportunity for positive change took a great deal of strength, and the ability to self-reflect. The young participants were able to identify this process and they shared their stories of self-discovery from “learning to get over your past, learning to let go of what you've been through and trying really hard to move on and then finding your dreams, what you really want to do, looking for support” (Erin). Sometimes the motivation was in realizing the limitations of immediate family and some of the girls stated that their motivation for change was inspired by the desire to not “end up like the rest of [their] family in PA.” Each wanted “to be a good person.”

Yes, because if you don't think about the future you're going to stay who you are. And then compared to people who think of the future they can see themselves doing something, so of course they work towards it compared to people who are thinking about the now about being good, like, about being who they are

Their lives, they are going to stay that way. There might be little change like, a different job, some might even get famous, but that's really rare. (Carrie)

Support

When asked what they needed to succeed the girls' response was unanimous: "Motivation and support. That's the biggest one is support. Without support you don't have motivation, you don't have anything to work for." The majority of the photographers took pictures of people in their lives who had provided support and guidance when they felt they had lost their way. The participants found that they received support from two primary sources—family and peers. However, they felt that in order to receive support they had to be open to those around them. As Erin explained,

I had to get up off my knees first, I had to step up, I had to sacrifice, I had to quit a lot of bad habits, like I was getting stoned and drinking and partying and I had to quit that and then I just focused on school. Then, when I opened up my door, a lot of other doors opened up for me at school, and the opportunities of dancing and stuff. So, I think that's a big one, is learning to get over your past, learning to let go of what you've been through and trying really hard to move on and then finding your dreams, what you really want to do, looking for support. Once you have that support is definitely needed.

Role Models

Positive female Indigenous role models were seen as essential to reaching young Indigenous women. The participants felt that they needed strong examples in the community to guide them and teach them about being Indigenous women. Further, it was not enough just to identify those role models but necessary to have them actively involved in the social and emotional growth of young Indigenous girls and women. The participants recognized that not every young Indigenous woman has the opportunity to learn from a strong female role model in her family, making it essential for community programming to address this gap.

Yes, role models in every city but it's like, how involved are they, like there are a lot of role models like parents or aunties that you look up to and if you look up to then you turn out just fine. But if there are Aboriginal women who are speaking out for youth or organizing rallies against homelessness, speaking out doing interviews and writing articles about drugs and being against drugs and violence, then I think you would have to have more personal role models though. (Cherish)

Program

Contemporary Cultural Teachings

Cultural programming was seen as essential especially for young Indigenous women. The photographers felt that the cultural teachings specific to Indigenous girls was key to their social, emotional, and sexual development. They felt that with cultural teachings specific to Indigenous girls came the respect for women that has been eroded over the years. The photographers shared stories of their involvement in cultural activities that gave them a clearer sense of identity and importance as women.

Those that follow their cultures are more, respect their life more, and don't do as many things to their bodies as the other girls. Like, sure, I know a girl who is really into culture and just finished getting pregnant, well, had her baby, but she's really, she's beautiful girl inside and out and I met a couple girls who don't know what a Pow-wow dance is all they do is drink. (Rachel)

It gives them a reason to not do things, like, if you're making a dress than you have a reason not to drink, if you're going to a sweat lodge or going to a traditional dance or wake or something you know not to do drugs or not to ah, to abstain from doing harm to yourself, but girls who don't have a reason do it because it's considered the norm. (Erin)

Discussion

Community issues were seen as generational. The legacy of colonization and residential school had begun the process of stripping away not only Indigenous identity but also the importance of women in society. The combination of these issues could be explained by the loss of women's roles in the family and community.

The participants compared women's roles in the family and the community from a traditional perspective to current experiences informed by stereotypes and assumptions. The photographers viewed their role as young women as a constant struggle against the negative societal perceptions of Indigenous women. Reclaiming identity was seen as especially important in challenging current perceptions for their own success and for the success of future generations.

Reconnecting and reconstructing Indigenous women's identity is key not only to challenging current stereotypes and assumptions within the community but also to creating a foundation for growth for female Indigenous youth. Raising children and youth to understand and value the role of

women in family and community provides a basis for individual strength in identity, and in respect for women.

Understanding the importance of cultural programming in developing and strengthening the identity of Indigenous girls, the photographers were disappointed that programs were not genuinely promoting Indigenous teachings. They felt that programming specific to the needs of Indigenous youth should be an opportunity to promote identity development through cultural activities and teachings. These centres should provide access to role models and mentors who could offer guidance and leadership to Indigenous youth.

Further, these programs should be gender specific to help develop a positive sense of identity across the gender spectrum. The photographers spoke about the importance of recreating a sense of pride in being Indigenous and the importance that pride holds for family and community. They noted that young people involved in cultural activities had a sense of responsibility to live their lives mindful of the impact their decisions had on themselves, their families, and their communities.

Photographers identified a holistic picture of the needs of young people that included reflection into the emotional, social, cultural, and sexual issues of female Aboriginal youth living in urban centres. These issues were seen as a cycle with limited support in one area feeding into lack of success in another. They were aware of the struggle to create a sense of identity and find a place in which to situate themselves within their culture, families, and communities. The tone of the discussion and the images caught on film were of both desperation and hope. Although the young women were able to articulate their struggles, they were also able to identify what they needed to succeed.

Reflecting on this, the photographers recognized that what was being sought was a connection or re-connection to someone or something. The goal in the decision-making process, whether positive or negative, was in trying to find a place to belong, creating a space for self-identity. The photographers recognized the importance of cultural identity in creating meaning in the lives of young Indigenous women living in urban centres who were seen as double agents, as it were, neither fitting into the urban centre nor belonging to their reserve community. The participants stated that this, in combination with the shame they felt at being Indigenous, had detrimental effects on their esteem and confidence as young Indigenous women.

The photographers directed possibility for change at two levels—personal and program. Youth-identified responses supported existing research and literature in important ways evidenced at both a personal and program

level. In discussing each section, the photographers emphasized the need for inclusion of youth in developing a response to, and the promotion of, cultural teachings in strengthening identity in Indigenous youth.

The photographers began thinking about their struggles in their families and communities in relation to being educators rather than victims. In the course of their lives, the photographers felt that they had experienced and overcome many hardships and that their survival left them with important lessons for others experiencing similar adversity. The young women felt that the experience of being muted by society only compounded the impact of negative events and that young people need to be given the opportunity to talk openly about the reality of their lives in order to relieve the feelings of isolation felt among urban Indigenous youth.

The lessons they had to teach were not angry or blaming. The ability of these photographers to reflect on the needs of urban Indigenous youth supports findings that document the importance of including Indigenous youth program and policy development (Brown et al. 2007). Indigenous youth are able to speak thoughtfully and concretely about their circumstances and needs and they can generate viable responses that are realistic and achievable. Further, Indigenous youth are able to see past a superficial assessment of their issues in looking at a holistic understanding inclusive of historic, systemic, and cultural analysis (Brown et al 2007; Morris 2007). The photographers found that healing began with acknowledging the reality of adversity in the lives of urban Indigenous youth. In noting the challenges they face, the importance of familial and community support was emphasized. Until the youth were able to heal themselves and gain strength in response to adversity, they would be unable to be supports or role models to their peers or to future generations. The photographers believed that identifying strong female role models from their Indigenous community was essential to the growth and success of young Indigenous girls.

The participants reported a complete absence of cultural activity within health, social, and educational programs targeted for Indigenous youth and felt that including cultural teachings was essential to improving the delivery of services for Indigenous youth. In keeping with the findings of Brown et al. (2007) and MacNeil (2008), cultural teachings were thought to be important to strengthening the personal identity of Indigenous youth. The photographers noted that in the absence of programming promoting reconnection to Indigenous cultural identity, youth attending these programs were latching onto gang-related identities. Each photographer claimed that an initial response to programming targeted at Indigenous youth was met with

anticipation of a central location offering cultural teachings. However, within months of the program opening it became clear that the program served only to further negative stereotypes about Indigenous youth identity and to promote these stereotypes. This simply mired Indigenous youth in cycles of blame and anger. In order to overcome this cycle, the photographers believed that the primary goal of programming specific to Indigenous youth needed to promote and encourage reconnection to cultural teaching and identity. The photographers believed that programs inclusive of cultural teachings would increase confidence and self-esteem through helping young people to reclaim identity as Indigenous persons.

The reality of current experience led the photographers to believe that young Indigenous women would have an important role to play in improving the circumstances of future generations. They noted that with teen parenting among Indigenous girls and women steadily increasing, it was crucial for programming to address issues of cultural identity so that young parents could raise their children to be proud of their Indigenous heritage. Young Indigenous mothers need to learn not only the skills of motherhood but also the cultural teachings and ceremonies that accompany age and stage development. Relearning the value of Indigenous women through cultural teachings and ceremony was important to promoting a sense of pride in identity for the next generation.

Conclusion

The findings of this project are comprised entirely of the voices and perspectives of young Indigenous women and girls. The goal of the project was to identify issues important to them, and to understand their community and programming needs. The participants helped inform how public program development affects young urban Indigenous women and they made program recommendations to actively and effectively affect the lives of female Indigenous youth. The photographers' responses supported those shared in earlier studies in which young people suggested that they clearly understood what was necessary to make positive and lasting changes (Brown et al. 2007; Morris 2007). The young Indigenous women in this study were able to outline clearly the issues pertinent to their individual, familial, and community lives. Further, they were able to identify responses to the issues on all levels including suggesting ways of programming that could be adapted to meet the needs of young Indigenous women.

A common theme of the photos and the conversations with these young women supported current literature on the importance of cultural continuity in creating positive and lasting change for Indigenous people, families, and communities. As the photographers reflected on and analyzed the issues and needs of urban Indigenous youth, the recognition of the significance of lost identity and the importance of regaining cultural knowledge and ties resonated in their photos and words. As well, the young women discussed the important role girls and women had to play in re-establishing cultural ties for this generation and for generations to come.

Reclaiming Indigenous identity through culture was thought to be of utmost importance for Indigenous youth. The photographers claimed that this reconnection to cultural identity was especially important for young Indigenous girls because traditional teachings recognized the value and strength inherent in women. The photographers felt that reconnecting with their Indigenous heritage and identity was key to addressing many of the current socioeconomic concerns. Incorporating these teachings into their everyday lives translated into respect for their minds, bodies, and spirits and challenged them to live their lives in a way that respected each.

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Note

1. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity of the youth involved in the Photovoice project.