

WHAT IS SPACES & PLACES?

The *Spaces & Places* Research Project, led by Dr. Linda Liebenberg (PI), Daphne Hutt-MacLeod (Co-Investigator) and Jenny Reich (Project Manager) explores the ways in which communities can build better civic and cultural engagement with youth. We are interested in fostering cultural and civic engagement of youth because these two activities have been identified as important social determinants of health and wellbeing, especially for Aboriginal youth in Canada¹. This qualitative study has taken place in Eskasoni, together with two communities in Labrador². In Eskasoni, this study was completed with the help of staff from Eskasoni Mental Health Services (EMHS).

A total of 8 youth between the ages of 14-18 from Eskasoni have participated in the project by helping us gather and analyse data. These youth have also helped us disseminate findings back to local and broader communities.

WHAT WE DID



In this study, we asked youth to take photos of the spaces and places around them; spaces that made them feel they belong and places where they feel they don't belong. We also filmed each youth for a day. Youth were then interviewed about both their photographs and a video compilation the research team (a collaboration between research staff and Eskasoni Mental Health Services staff) created from each young person's video footage. We did this in June and July of 2014, and then again in March of 2015. By repeating the process twice, a year apart, we could gain a better understanding of how young people engage with their community as they age, and during very different seasons (summer and winter).

¹ Chandler, M.J. & Lalonde, C.E. (2009). Cultural continuity as a moderator of suicide risk among Canada's First Nations. In, L.J. Kirmayer & G.G. Valaskakis (Eds.), *Healing traditions: The mental health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada* (pp. 221-248). Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia Press.

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² For more information on all three sites, visit www.youthspacesandplaces.org

In 2014, after the first round of data gathering, we held a focus group and data analysis workshop. Over the course of a weekend we asked the youth to help us understand the data and begin the initial analysis.

WHAT WE FOUND

Findings from 2014

Overall four themes emerged from the first round of data gathering. These themes are relational supports (family, elders, friends and the broader community), engagement with culture, including language and nature; strong personal attributes like self-esteem; and holistic education.

In order to do well, youth from Eskasoni need family and other relational supports, access to and engagement with culture, strong personal attributes like self-esteem, together with the resources to support these attributes, and holistic education. For these young people, engagement with culture includes opportunities to socialize with elders from whom they can learn about their heritage; opportunities to learn and speak their language; and maintaining cultural practices such as respect for others and the environment. Participants believe that personal attributes are strengthened and nurtured through both positive feedback from others (such as parents, teachers and friends) as well as successes and achievements in the things youth are good at. Of course to achieve success with their talents, youth need access to community-based resources that will allow them to develop these talents - for example libraries and sports resources.



Youth believe that the cultural and geographic landscape of the community is key to doing well and aligns with the educational aspects of young people's resilience resources. While the school setting provides more formal and curriculum based approaches to supporting cultural engagement (such as Mi'kmaq immersion and cultural curriculum), connections to culture and community are fostered through sports activities, recreational resources and community activities³. The basketball coach, for example, bases much of his strategy on the notion of respect for nature, elders and others. The community has integrated interactive cultural

³ Most if not all of these activities are implemented, sponsored, supported and/or facilitated in part or whole by the Eskasoni Mental Health Services Youth Mental Health team.



components to the community park, 'Goat Island' - where, many youth explain they go to train, run, or just hang out. The Band Council often organizes 'garbage derbies' - community events aimed at community clean-up and building community connections. Youth feel that these aspects work together to support young people to be happy, healthy and contributing members of their community.

Findings from 2015

The second round of data collection took place in spring 2015. Six of the original eight youth participated in photo interviews and seven of the eight youth participated in filming days and video interviews. All of this despite a lot of inclement weather all winter and spring and subsequent rescheduling. In the second set of data collection more flexibility was introduced to the methodology. In some cases, youth shared photos and filming days. This was both a response to each participant's wishes and to ensure the most data was collected in a limited and less flexible time frame.

During this set of interviews future ambitions were a reoccurring theme. Many of the youth spoke about their hopes for the future. For some of the youth this involved discussing their plans for the fall as they were graduating from high school and perusing education outside of the community. For others it involved discussing their aspirations and goals regarding school, career, and athletic endeavours farther down the road. The majority of the youth discussed plans that would allow them to return to their community after training or education that would most likely take place outside of the community.

Another theme that emerged both during the interviews was how busy the youth are. This theme was reflected in the challenges of trying to schedule data collection and interview times with the participants. In the interviews youth highlighted the important role of extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and volunteering. These activities are important for the youth because not only do they encourage youth to develop skills, they also provide social connections and introduce youth to role models in their community. This seemed particularly important for the young men in the study. A number of the youth also have part-time jobs. However, the shortage of jobs in the community, particularly for young people, was expressed as a real concern.

The winter and spring of 2015 was particularly cold and snowy. The video days demonstrated the way youth navigate these conditions in their community and the activities they are able to enjoy and those that are limited as a result of the weather. Data reflected youth enjoyment of activities such as snowmobiling and walking out on the frozen lake. In their interviews, they discussed learning about other activities such as snowmobiling and safety knowledge such as being able to tell when the ice is thick enough to walk. Importantly, youth emphasise the importance of learning these skills from older members in their community, typically family, but also from friends.

Collectively these findings echo those of the first phase of the study: youth have a strong appreciation for their community. They want to stay connected, but more importantly, they want to be involved in their community. Additionally, a key aspect of this involvement are



intergenerational connections as well as wholistic supports (that include education) which equip them with the skills necessary to continue this engagement.

WHAT WE HAVE DONE WITH THE FINDINGS

Dissemination projects

Youth participants from Eskasoni have engaged in several activities to help share the findings from the study. The first project they took on was presenting the findings in a mural painted on the wall of the Eskasoni Mental Health Services and Crisis Centre building, where a community healing garden and picnic area has been developed by other youth from the community, as a community resource. We have created a video of the mural making process to ensure the message reaches more people (see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJcb5mB8bel>). In addition to

the mural, some youth have created posters that reflect the themes they feel are key to the findings of the study in their community. These posters are available as post cards as well (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CiBkJhDPU>). Both the posters and postcards have been returned to the youth and EMHS to use and distribute. Findings from Eskasoni have been integrated with findings from the other two *Spaces & Places* sites, and published in a photobook.



Youth participants and EMHS staff presented findings of this study at the *Pathways to Resilience III: Beyond Nature vs. Nurture* conference in Halifax, in June 2015. Findings were shared at a panel symposium presentation and at the poster evening. One of the participants read her poetry at two conference events: Dr Cindy Blackstock's keynote address and at the poster evening. In addition to presenting the study's findings youth had the opportunity to share of their research experiences and expertise at a preconference workshop focused on meaningful

engagement of youth in research. The outcomes of this workshop are being written up for publication in an academic journal. The youth will participate as co-authors on this publication.

Two of the participants then attended the *Atlantic Summer Institute on Health and Safe Communities* in PEI, August 2015. The event was focused on Investing in *Child and Youth Mental Health - Mobilizing Atlantic Canadians for a Positive Future*. Findings were presented by Daphne Hutt-Macleod at the *3rd International Conference on Youth Mental Health Transformations: Next Generation Youth Mental Health* in Montreal during October 2015 hosted by the International Association Youth Mental Health. Three youth were sponsored by



the Graham Boeckh Foundation (including Hannah Battiste and Mallery Denny) to attend the conference.

Numerous engagement projects have followed on Spaces & Places. Some of these include:

- The Rita Joe Project, where the National Arts Centre of Canada asked teachers and students in five communities across Canada, including Eskasoni, to create a song based on what the poem by Rita Joe, *I Lost My Talk*, means to them and their community. Numerous students from Allison Bernard Memorial High School participated creating the song and music video for *Gentle Warrior* (<http://nac-cna.ca/en/ritajoesong/gentle-warrior>). In January, the students went to Ottawa to perform at a national event where a participant was asked to present her poetry. The poem has also been published in the *First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada* journal.
- Participants from the study have participated in the Live Different Builds (formerly Hero Holidays) where he went to the Dominican Republic with 11 other students for 12 days to help build a home for a family (<http://kinu.ca/news/eskasoni-students-learn-live-different>) as well as the Black Bear training program, a seven week training and youth development program hosted by the Canadian Forces. Participants hold the rank of private during the program, and participate in military and Aboriginal culture events.
- Several youth from Spaces & Places are participating on the newly formed ACCESS Eskasoni Youth Council while Mallery Denny and Arnold Silliboy are serving on the National ACCESS Youth Council.
- A Saturday afternoon Gamer's Helping Gamer's program will be launched in March. This is a two hour program geared toward youth who are socially isolated due to their online gaming activities. The goals of the program include, 1) Providing them with brief educational sessions (15-20 minutes) on topics such as cultural practices, bullying, social interaction, and so forth; and, 2) Giving them an opportunity to participate in real world activities with other isolated gamers in the hope of fostering a bond between participants
- Eskasoni Mental Health Services are also starting a Youth Helping Youth program that is modelled on the same premise as their Mother's Helping Mother's and Dad's Helping Dad's programs.

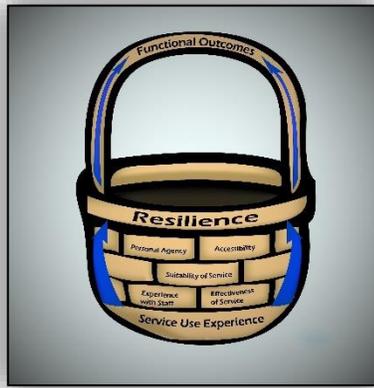
Additionally, various research funding applications are underway to expand on the existing research infrastructure established within Eskasoni Mental Health Services.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE PROVISION

To understand the full implications of the *Spaces & Places* findings, this study needs to be seen in the broader context of evidence-based practice in Eskasoni. Simultaneously to major service structure revisions within Eskasoni Mental Health Services, the community began participating in an international, longitudinal, mixed methods study of effective service provision for youth with complex needs: The *Pathways to Resilience* study (<http://www.resilienceresearch.org/research/projects/pathways-to-resilience>). In Eskasoni, youth engaged with EMHS said they had control over the services they received and that they received the services that were right for them. They also believed that staff would stick by them



and that they had someone to talk to when they were in trouble. In their life stories, they explained that the recreational activities make formal mental health services more accessible. Staff engagement in these activities makes it easier for youth to talk to staff. These activities also provide youth with safe, fun spaces to get away from their problems for a while and provides them with an extended and positive social network. Findings highlighted how the wholistic



service provision model adopted by EMHS services works for youth. Youth experience less stigma when activities are targeted at all youth in the community rather than just those dealing with mental health concerns. Recreational activities give youth a chance to see staff as people first, mental health professionals second. Social spaces are safer spaces for youth to ask for help. Recreational activities provides youth with a social network that adds to the formal supports young people receive from mental health staff⁴. These findings mirror other findings from that study which show that in order for services to have a meaningful impact on youth they need to be provided in ways that are relevant to youth, that are respectful of youth, and that are empowering⁵.

EMHS drew on these findings to inform continued revisions to their practices and model of service provision, enhancing and amplifying their model of community development and collaborative, integrated service provision.

Findings from the *Spaces & Places* study validate the changes implemented by the EMHS services. Importantly, while these findings validate the service approach being used, they demonstrate the far reaching impact of this approach. Four years after implementing a community-development model, we see clearly how youth are able to navigate their community in ways that support calculated risk taking that is essential to positive youth development. We see youth with a strong level of confidence that they are supported and loved by a broad network of community members. We see youth who are able to have rich hopes and dreams for their lives, given the relational and physical resources that surround them. Perhaps most crucially, we see young people with a deep respect for their peers and broader community; a respect that translates into care, motivation and support for one another. And we see young people who are able to reach out for help when they need it.

⁴ Ikeda, J. & Liebenberg, L. (2011). *The Pathways to Resilience Project: Eskasoni, Nova Scotia Report*. Resilience Research Centre, Halifax Nova Scotia, Dalhousie University.

⁵ Ungar, M., Liebenberg, L., Armstrong, M., Dudding, P., & Van de Vijver, F. (2013). Patterns of Psychosocial Service Use: Individual and Contextual Risk factors, and Resilience among Adolescents Using Multiple Services. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 37, 150-159. DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2012.05.007

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For more information and updates on this and other projects, go to our website www.youthspacesandplaces.org.

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