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Indigenous Community-Based Research and Research Methods: The Role of Community Research Liaisons

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Abstract

In conducting Indigenous community-based research, researchers rely on community connections that go beyond transactional relationships. For research to

transcend a transactional dynamic, it often requires researchers to be embedded within the community. Embedded researchers play a unique role in navigating the priorities of both university-based research and the community. This paper

highlights the work of two Community Research Liaisons (CRLs) who skillfully navigate the process of building relationships between the community and the university, as part of a health research project focused on culture-based programs for urban Indigenous youth in Kelowna and Lillooet, Canada. These relationships not only strengthen existing community connections but also foster new ones. Drawing on literature that describes roles like CRLs, we provide examples of the contributions that embedded researchers make. Through conversations as a community university team, we reflect on the successes and challenges related to relationship building, supporting community-university connections and involving the community in decision-making throughout the research process. This paper aims to support other community-based research projects by highlighting the significance that embedded researchers bring to the research process, as well as the role CRLs play in ongoing research partnerships and ensuring that generated knowledge is accessible, relevant, and usable by those communities.¹

Keywords: Community-based research, Community Research Liaison, Community-

engaged research, cultural programming, youth and young adults, Indigenous research, Indigenous-led research, Indigenous youth wellness

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Introduction

Historically, academic discourse has avoided and devalued Indigenous knowledge systems, with Indigenous

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research methodologies (IRM) only gaining recognition in the late 1990s (Nakata, 1998). Today, IRMs are becoming more broadly practiced and accepted, as Indigenous scholars and researchers create methodologies that align with the specific Indigenous knowledge systems of the community or people they work alongside. More recently, in efforts to do research “with” and not “on” Indigenous Peoples, the involvement of community-embedded researchers has taken flight (Edwards et al., 2008; Victor et al., 2016; Smith, 2021; Teare et al., 2024). This important and timely growing awareness in research praxis encourages us to decolonize and Indigenize research methodology in a way that recognizes both research findings and processes as led and desired by the community. This paper reflects on our experience with Community Research Liaisons (CRLs) in Indigenous community-based research, illustrating how community-embedded researchers enhance cultural-safety and strengthen IRM.

Indigenous Research Methodologies

Decolonising methodologies, as explained by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), challenge Western ways of knowing and doing to affirm that Indigenous knowledge systems are relevant and present within Indigenous communities. IRM requires researchers to

be diligent in recognising that research has been historically, and continues to be, rooted in the dominant Western scientific research method that aligns with colonial and imperial ideologies (Smith, 2021; Lee, 2009). As a result, many Indigenous communities hesitate to be research partners due to distrust of institutionalised research partners and fears of study results not being shared back with the community, among many other reasons (Burhansstipanov et al., 2005).

IRMs are rooted in communities’ specific culture, language, and visions of wellbeing (Smith, 2021; Lee, 2009). For example, Jenny Lee (2009) uses the Māori term *Pūrākau*, meaning ‘myths, legends and stories’, as a methodology that engages with historical, social, and political research contexts, to challenge earlier misrepresentations of *pūrakau* as mere myths. Similarly, Cindy Gaudet (2018), uses the Métis and Cree practice of *keeoukaywin* (visiting) to create the Visiting Way methodology. This IRM is founded in relationality and disputes colonial hierarchies of knowledge and inaccuracies about Indigenous Peoples’ ways of knowing, being, and doing. Smith (2021) advances IRM discourse by asserting that the call for Indigenous approaches to research does not inherently preclude the inclusion of Western methodologies, which may be incorporated

where considered appropriate by the local community.

Shawn Wilson (2008) positions IRM as based in Indigenous research paradigms, which include self-acknowledgment of ontology (your beliefs of reality), epistemology (how you think about reality), axiology (a set of morals and ethics), and methodology (approaches to knowledge generation). Wilson (2008) offers that research approaches need to honour an Indigenous paradigm to support non-extractive research tendencies. Relationality, a common cultural value amongst Indigenous Peoples, is foundational to IRM, with relationship building essential to paradigms rooted in local context (Kovach, 2021; Cram, 2011). These relationships are shaped by spatial proximity, and reducing distance serves to strengthen them (Wilson, 2008).

Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR)

Action research engages researchers as collaborative partners in pursuing meaningful change, guided by systematic research processes and techniques, and grounded in reflective and relational practices (Hare, 2021). While action research is a commonly accepted in both Indigenous and Western research, integrating Indigenous perspectives

requires going beyond the simple insertion of Indigenous elements into existing Western frameworks (Kovach, 2021; Hare, 2021; Dudgeon et al., 2020). Jan Hare (2021) positions Indigenous principles of relationality, humility, storytelling, and reciprocity, to offer guidance in strengthening action research that meaningfully engages Indigenous Peoples.

Participatory Action Research (PAR), builds on action research by ensuring explicit participation and guidance from research participants, critical reference groups (people who provide ongoing feedback, guidance, and critical perspectives), and other stakeholders (Cram, 2011). This community participation empowers those involved in the research as well as the entire community (Dudgeon et al., 2020).

Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) centres the community as an equal partner throughout all stages of the research plan, design, and implementation (Lewis and Boyd, 2012). It also focuses on academic-community relationships developed for the goals of improving community wellbeing and reduction of health disparities (Wallerstein and Duran, 2006). CBPAR involves building long-term relationships and gaining firsthand knowledge of the community and its members (Lewis and Boyd, 2012; Cram, 2011). Many scholars view CBPAR as an

approach that can complement IRM, given its emphasis on local contexts and collaborative processes.

Community Research Liaisons and Similar Embedded Researcher Roles

CBPAR approaches often utilise community-embedded research roles. These roles go by many names such as community research liaisons (CRLs) or community organisers (COs) and have played a crucial part in Indigenous research. These roles ensure research is collaborative, respectful, and rooted in community members lived experiences. We use the term CRL as interchangeable with other terms for embedded researchers. The historical development and growing prominence of these roles reflect a broader shift toward more inclusive, participatory, and ethical research methodologies that emphasize community ownership and control (Edwards et al., 2008; Victor et al., 2016; Teare et al., 2024).

Community-embedded researchers fundamentally challenge traditional research paradigms by positioning community members as co-researchers, rather than as passive subjects. Boyd's (2012) study in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada, demonstrates how community-embedded researchers, particularly low-income women, were

involved in every aspect of the research process, from design to dissemination. This approach empowered community members by shifting power dynamics, allowing their voices to be amplified to address the historical imbalance of marginalized communities being studied *on* rather than *with* (Salvador et al., 2024; Liebenberg et al., 2017). Teare et al. (2024) further elaborate on unequal power dynamics between researchers and research participants, emphasizing how these can be decolonised through community-based participatory research involving co-learning and collaboration throughout all stages of the research process.

Bends et al. (2013) describes using the term "community organizer" (CO) to refer to Indigenous community-university research liaisons at the Center for Native Health Partnerships. The CO plays a critical role in fostering relational accountability between the community and the university, ensuring that relationships are based on mutual respect and are not transactional. Relational accountability is an ethical research practice characterised by reciprocity through continual community involvement and responsibility for meeting the community's relevant needs and priorities (Brant et al., 2023). Bends et al. (2013) argue that COs, who are deeply

embedded in their communities, bring credibility and trust to the research process. Their involvement ensures that research findings are culturally relevant, accessible, and meaningful to the community.

Kendall and Marshall (2004) further underscore the importance of local community research partners in ensuring research is culturally relevant and respectful. These partners serve as bridges between academic researchers and the community (Bends et al., 2013). Their generational knowledge helps overcome potential barriers that academic researchers may face due to unfamiliarity with local protocols or political dynamics (Kendall and Marshall, 2004). Edwards et al. (2008) emphasize that treating community members as equal partners makes CBPR both ethical and effective, countering historical exploitation by involving communities from setting the research agenda to dissemination. By acting as mediators, facilitators, and leaders, and grounding the research process in relational accountability, cultural respect, and community participation, embedded researchers facilitate non-extractive research that empowers communities to shape the direction and outcomes of the research.

Methodology

Edwards et al. (2008) and MacLean et al. (2009) highlight that while existing literature acknowledges the importance of community involvement and the roles community-embedded researchers play in the research process, there is a notable gap regarding the challenges Community Research Liaisons and Community Organisers face when conducting research within their own communities, as well as the strengths their involvement brings. In response, this paper aims to improve research practices within community-partnered research through the addition of CRLs. Additionally, we seek to highlight the significant contributions of embedded researchers, like CRLs, in building and strengthening social capital, fostering relationships within the community, and creating new connections both within and between communities.

To better understand the experiences of CRLs, our community-university research team made up of two CRLs and four university-based researchers engaged in conversation to explore the experiences, successes, and challenges of community embedded research work throughout the Indigenous Youth Wellness (IYW) Project focused on urban Indigenous youth and young adult wellness.

Indigenous Youth Wellness (IYW) Project

The IYW Project (2021–2025), formally titled 'Urban Indigenous Identity, Gender and Wellness: Sharing Wisdom Across Generations', was co-led by the Lillooet Friendship Centre Society (Snek'nukwá7 Ul'usilcálhew) in Lillooet, British Columbia, the Métis Community Services Society of British Columbia in Kelowna, and researchers from the University of British Columbia Okanagan. The purpose of the IYW project was to learn from urban Indigenous youth, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Traditional Healers about how wellness is connected to land-based activities, ceremony, and Indigenous identity. To achieve this, centres co-developed a series of wellness programs and activities for urban Indigenous youth, facilitated and led by local Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

From the start, the project was guided by the voices of Indigenous community members and the CRLs. As described by Donna Kurtz, a Métis scholar, and several other Indigenous and non-Indigenous contributors, respectful relationships, community ownership, and valuing diverse perspectives are key in decolonizing research with Indigenous communities (Kurtz et al., 2024). These decolonizing research practices also extend to creating

systems of governance that protect Indigenous knowledges and strengthen the health of urban and rural Indigenous communities (Kurtz et al., 2024).

Within the IYW project, Community Advisory Teams (CATs) composed of local Elders, Knowledge Keepers, youth, and centre staff ensured that cultural and traditional protocols were respected and that the research remained relevant to community values. The CATs also helped CRLs navigate and lead the research in ways that were aligned with local needs. Another form of governance that guided the project was the Youth and Young Adult Advisory Council (YYAAC), which consisted of several Indigenous youth and young adults from both Lillooet and Kelowna, BC. The role of this council was to keep the research team accountable to the community and ensure the project remained relevant to youth and young adults. The youth and young adults on this council provided suggestions, advice, feedback, knowledge, and ideas for programs, future research initiatives, and for the project overall.

For the first year of the project, the team gathered input from urban Indigenous youth connected to three urban Indigenous community organisations. In October 2022, the project launched a series of community-led programs based

on these recommendations. Two centres hosted five community programs each over the course of the project. Activities included fish scale art, plant walks, jigging lessons, teachings and storytelling from Elders, gathering and preparing traditional foods and medicines, and participating in traditional ceremonies. Through surveys, sharing circles, and community gatherings, youth shared their interests and priorities related to land, ceremony, culture, and identity. Following each program, a sharing circle was held with participating youth, guided by local Elders.

Three surveys were continuously offered: 1) an Elder, Knowledge Keeper, Facilitator Survey for program leaders; 2) a Youth and Young Adult Activity Survey for each activity; and 3) a Youth and Young Adult Traditional Wellness Survey exploring wellbeing, desired activities, and demographics. Nearing the end of the project, a one-time survey asked for community-wide (those falling within the age range of 14 to 34) ideas and suggestions for Indigenous community-led activities, programs and services that support land-based activities, ceremony and being Indigenous. Each survey was co-developed by the community-research team. Gatherings included a Collective Orientation Gathering in November 2022 and Annual Gatherings in May 2023 and 2024. These gatherings were

opportunities for Elders, youth, CRLs, CAT members, executive directors and university-based researchers to build relationships, share knowledge and collectively plan for the research. The project concluded in March 2025, marking the conclusion of a deeply collaborative process that will inform future research and community-led activities.

The Role of the Community Research Liaison

CRLs held a central role in the project as community-embedded researchers, co-leading research activities in ways that reflected the priorities and contexts of the communities they belong to. Hired directly by the Lillooet Friendship Centre Society (Snek'nukwá7 Ul'í'usilcálhew) and Métis Community Services Society of British Columbia—rather than the university researchers—the CRLs were staff members of their respective centres. Their positions were funded through the research grant but grounded in community values and oversight.

The CRL role was rooted in cultural knowledge, local relationships, and organizational expertise. They served as bridges between their respective communities and the university research team, fostering trust and accountability while ensuring the project remained

responsive to local needs. The training and support structure for CRLs was designed as an ongoing, collaborative process, which included a comprehensive orientation followed by weekly CRL-university team member meetings for ongoing training, communication, relationship building, and planning. These meetings followed a circle format, in which all members—regardless of role or position—were encouraged to contribute equally. This circle format was an intentional choice to align our methods with IRM and CBPAR. Lavallée (2009) shares that sharing circle formats are a holistic, egalitarian method rooted in Indigenous healing and ceremonial practices, where all participants, including the facilitator, are regarded as equal and share knowledge, alongside engaging emotional and spiritual dimensions. We embodied this by taking turns speaking, being careful not to interrupt, and ensuring everyone could speak before group discussion. We also often visited during the beginning of our meetings which created space for relationship and trust building, following a CBPAR approach.

While university-based researchers supported CRLs through weekly meetings which included discussions regarding ethical research practices and Indigenous methodologies, CRLs were also mentored

and supported by the executive directors of the centres and received guidance from the Community Advisory Teams. This community-based mentorship reinforced the importance of centering local leadership and knowledge, and a commitment to mutual learning across the team.

CRL responsibilities included organising land-based programming and cultural activities, recruiting youth, obtaining consent, working with program leaders (Elders and Knowledge Keepers), distributing surveys, convening CAT meetings, organising sharing circles and community gatherings, and securely managing participant information. As trusted members of their communities, CRLs ensured that participants felt informed, respected, and supported throughout the research. CRLs also supported recruitment for both the CATs and the YYAAC, drawing on their pre-existing community networks.

In addition to coordinating and facilitating program activities and data collection, CRLs contributed to the ongoing co-development of the project. They brought forward community insights, raised concerns, and guided decision-making in ways that helped ground the project in community realities. CRLs played a key role in shaping the research design and offering important feedback on research

processes and tools, modeling the CBPAR approach. For example, they identified when sharing circle questions were too broad or abstract for youth participants, prompting the university team to revise the questions.

One CRL also recommended the creation of the Elder, Knowledge Keeper, Facilitator Survey, which was later integrated into the project to improve reflection and evaluation practices. Their involvement extended to analysis through feedback on knowledge mobilization materials like infographics, and active contribution to sharing circle analysis. In addition, CRLs also provided mentorship to the university team through sharing their deep understanding of community contexts and processes, which helped university-based researchers understand what would and wouldn't work in practice.

Findings: CRL Experiences and Impacts

A thematic analysis of this project's qualitative findings reveals how relationships, accessibility, and collaboration shaped both the process and outcomes of the IYW Project. Guided by CBPAR and IRM, the analysis highlights how meaningful engagement with youth, Elders, and community members depended on sustained relational

commitment, cultural responsiveness, and flexibility within research processes. Five interrelated themes emerged: (1) relationships as foundational, (2) addressing youth access barriers, (3) navigating research processes and building community awareness, (4) leveraging established relationships to overcome barriers, and (5) program impacts and lessons learned. Together, these themes illustrate how trust, reciprocity, and community-led approaches are central to successful research and program implementation within Indigenous local-contexts, demonstrating that relationships are not simply tools for engagement but are themselves the foundation for research partnerships.

Relationships as Foundational

Meaningful connections between youth, Elders, community members, CRLs, and the university team were essential for the success of this work. Building long-term relationships was significantly enhanced by engaging with community members for firsthand local and cultural knowledge (Cram, 2011). These relationships allowed trust to grow and created environments conducive to authentic engagement that avoided tokenistic experiences (Dungeon et al., 2020). The research team quickly determined that relationship-building

required personalised, consistent interaction to strengthen our approach. While typical recruitment methods such as posters and emails raised awareness regarding program activities, direct community presence proved most effective for engaging youth and program facilitators. This presence involved attending community events and connecting with families, during which information was shared through informal conversations.

Additionally, personalised check-ins and reminder text messages were important for supporting youth participation. In this way, our emphasis on relational recruitment reflects how IRM and CBPAR can work in tandem through honouring Indigenous relational values while thoughtfully integrating Western research approaches that align with community priorities, demonstrating how both approaches can complement one another in practice (Hare, 2021; Smith, 2021).

The relationships between the research team, including the CRLs, with youth were characterised by respect for individual readiness levels and comfort zones. During sharing circles, some youth initially chose not to speak but continued attending programs. Over time, many gradually increased their verbal participation, with some eventually

assuming leadership responsibilities, such as joining the YYAAC, serving as program assistants, supporting community gatherings, or mentoring younger participants. The programs also intentionally created spaces where youth could participate according to their comfort levels, without pressure to share until they felt ready. This was aided by CRLs predictable and steady involvement.

Intergenerational relationships with Elders played a significant role in deepening the cultural aspects of the programs. Wilson (2008) describes relational accountability and intergenerational knowledge-sharing as part of Indigenous epistemology, and thus Indigenous research paradigms. Youth established authentic connections with Elders both during and outside of scheduled programming. Some visited Elders afterward to continue conversations and ask questions. These relationships, characterised by mutual trust and openness, facilitated healing, identity development, and strengthened youth connections to their communities and culture.

Collaborative relationships within the research team were equally important. Weekly CRL-university team meetings functioned as spaces where community knowledge was valued and respected. CRLs provided essential feedback on

research tools and activities as equal research partners. This collaborative approach ensured the research methodology reflected community perspectives, with local knowledge informing decisions about approaches most likely to resonate with participants.

Addressing Youth Access Barriers

Transportation consistently emerged as a significant barrier to youth participation. While programs were open and welcoming, geographic accessibility remained challenging, particularly for youth residing outside town centres or in rural areas. The research team documented how transportation limitations directly affected participation rates. For example, one youth missed a CAT meeting due to lack of transportation and reluctance to request assistance. CRLs determined that proactively anticipating and addressing practical needs such as transportation, nutrition, and emotional support, was fundamental to establishing trust and demonstrating genuine inclusivity. When transportation was successfully addressed, youth gained access to relationship-building opportunities with peers, Elders, and cultural practices, connections that motivated continued engagement. Meeting youth “where they are” both geographically and emotionally required ongoing attention to daily barriers.

Navigating Research Processes and Building Community Awareness

A primary challenge for CRLs involved navigating formal research processes and community expectations and practices. Many youth and their families were unfamiliar with research procedures including consent processes, survey administration, and demographic data collection, which can create distrust (Burhansstipanov et al., 2005). This disconnect between community expectations and research requirements created participant barriers as individuals were not accustomed to the amount of paperwork involved in research processes. While ethical protocols and research standards remained essential for maintaining study integrity and accountability, simplifying technical language in research documents became necessary for improving accessibility (Victor et al., 2016). CRLs played a crucial role in mitigating administrative elements that might otherwise discourage participation.

Moreover, direct involvement of research team members in program activities helped bridge the gap between the academic research structures and the community contexts. Their presence facilitated introductions, conversations, and informal connections that demystified the research

process and enhanced its integration within the community. Through firsthand participation, research team members established personal connections that strengthened trust and encouraged engagement.

A further challenge involved limited community awareness of one of the centres and the IYW Project. Many community members, especially those who might benefit from services offered, were unaware of the centre's existence or available programming. This knowledge gap complicated recruitment efforts, particularly among individuals who might not proactively seek such services. Visiting during community events and engaging with people face-to-face was the most effective way to connect with individuals and recruit youth to join programs.

Leveraging Established Relationships to Overcome Barriers

Established community relationships proved instrumental in addressing recruitment and participation challenges. When community members, particularly youth's parents and caregivers developed trust in CRLs and centres, youth were more likely to participate in the programs. These trusted relationships created a foundation for sustained engagement, as families gained confidence in program safety and

relevance (Cram, 2011). Moreover, these connections allowed for more organic, word-of-mouth recruitment, which proved to be an effective way of increasing participation. When community members shared positive experiences, they encouraged broader involvement, reinforcing collective belonging and shared purpose that overcame distrust of institutional research processes.

Program Impacts and Successes

Despite implementation challenges, the project demonstrated meaningful impacts on youth, Elders, Knowledge Keepers and the broader community, particularly in communities previously lacking youth programming. These initiatives provided opportunities for youth to gather, connect with cultural knowledges and practices, and experience a sense of belonging that many had not previously encountered. Over time, youth participants demonstrated increased confidence, verbal engagement, and overall program investment. Many began arriving early to sessions, staying afterwards, and bringing friends. They shared their learnings with their family members, contributing to expanding community engagement circles and knowledge transmission. This expansion continued as non-participants expressed interest in joining, demonstrating the strength of word-of-

mouth communication and the value the community saw in the initiative.

Intergenerational relationships between youth and Elders proved particularly transformative. Beyond participation during sharing circles, youth reached out to Elders outside of scheduled programming. For many participants, this represented their first experience feeling comfortable asking questions about culture or life experiences. Youth participants also developed enhanced purpose and direction. One participant, who had experienced mental health challenges and familial disconnection, found renewed purpose through sharing circle participation. Through connection with an Elder who shared their personal story, the youth experienced a moment of clarity and developed a newfound desire to be involved in cultural programming. Other participants discovered creative abilities such as beadwork and felt empowered to display their creations at community gatherings, representing growth that might not have occurred without program participation. Even incremental changes carried significant meaning as youth began to see themselves as part of something larger, with many demonstrating initiative, reflecting genuine personal growth.

Lessons Learned

While foundational relationships were critical to the success of the role, the CRL's impact extended beyond individual connections. The CRL role required an understanding of the life contexts of youth, as well as the broader familial and community dynamics shaping their experiences (Kendall and Marshall, 2004). When families face barriers such as limited educational resources or social support, the risk of isolation increases, reducing opportunities for youth to build relationships with peers and trusted adults. To counter this, CRLs established trust, demonstrated genuine care, and engaged in conversation to fully understand family circumstances. Thus, the CRL role required emotional intelligence, empathy, flexibility, reflectivity, and non-judgmental approaches.

Adaptability was another key facet of the role, such as anticipating last-minute changes, cancellations, or the need for backup plans. CBPAR benefits from this flexibility, emphasizing participation, accountability, and collaboration while challenging inequalities and promoting socially responsible, culturally aware research (Cram, 2011). The ability to pivot proved especially important in Indigenous community contexts, where family and community events such as funerals or

crises take precedence, often necessitating immediate changes in plans.

Weekly CRL-university team meetings served as a vital platform for planning, problem-solving, ongoing support, and reflection on community needs. However, balancing CRL responsibilities with other personal or professional obligations presented ongoing challenges. Frequently, the time and energy required for effective community engagement, recruitment, and relationship-building exceeded what was realistically available through the part-time role. Increased dedicated time allocation would maximize the CRL role's potential impact. Training and support significantly influenced CRL effectiveness, with technical and cultural safety preparation helping CRLs navigate the complexities of both community dynamics and the research process. Understanding local protocols and territory-specific knowledge enabled more meaningful and respectful participant engagement, ensuring cultural relevance and accessibility (Kendall and Marshall, 2004).

One notable program achievement was the emergence of youth leadership. Initially hesitant participants evolved into active contributors to program planning and facilitation. These leadership opportunities increased their sense of ownership and investment. Feedback from the community

also suggested that the formal title "Community Research Liaison" did not fully capture the relationality of the position, with alternatives like "Community Connector" potentially better reflecting the role's nature. Hosting community orientation events prior to program implementation could further boost engagement and support. Additionally, greater presence and participation by university team members at community events could demonstrate a genuine commitment to relationship-building, rather than positioning themselves in an "overseeing" role.

Reflections

Community-embedded researchers, such as CRLs, play a critical role in advancing Indigenous-led research that challenges traditional, colonial paradigms (Bends et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2008). Several themes identified in the IYW project align with existing literature on community-based and Indigenous-led research. This paper contributes to that emerging area by sharing CRL reflections from the IYW project.

Shifting Power Dynamics

The shift from externally driven to community-led approaches, as demonstrated in this project, enabled the

communities to guide both research processes and outcomes aligned with their values. As Boyd (2008) notes, authentic collaboration must begin at a project's inception, an approach prioritized from the early stages of IYW.

Community Based Research is inherently complex and time-intensive (Boyd, 2008). In the IYW project, this meant adapting timelines to align with community events and the logistical needs of youth, such as transportation or alignment with centre protocols. Bends et al. (2013) underscore the value of flexibility, suggesting that the loosely defined nature of CRL roles allows them to grow in ways that are responsive to community needs. In IYW, CRLs were encouraged to reflect on questions like, "What do the youth and community need from this role?" and take on responsibilities that evolved in response to those needs.

Support and mentorship remained vital throughout IYW, especially as CRLs engaged with emotionally sensitive content shared by youth. Weekly team meetings provided space to debrief and process these experiences, share successes, and stay connected to the positive impacts youth were reporting. Consistent with findings by Boyd (2008) and Edwards et al. (2010) the co-learning that occurred within team meetings sparked essential conversations about conducting research in

culturally respectful and relational ways. These meetings became spaces where the experiences and knowledges of CRLs and academic researchers was treated as equally valuable.

Cultural Respect and Relevance

By attending local events and engaging with families, CRLs embedded the research in existing relationships and contexts. Their involvement helped shape research questions, methods, and youth activities that resonated with local ways of knowing. While academic institutions often focus on methodological rigor and publication outputs, Indigenous communities frequently prioritize relevance and tangible outcomes. CRLs helped navigate this tension throughout IYW by advocating for practical, community-focused deliverables while balancing academic requirements. In their mentorship of youth and other community members, CRLs contributed to long-term capacity-building and strengthened the foundation for sustainable, community-led research.

Community-Based and Ethical Research

The IYW project was grounded in community-based and ethical research. CRLs contributed to decolonising practices by challenging academic norms that have

historically excluded Indigenous knowledge systems. Western research practices, such as dense consent forms and demographic questionnaires, often act as barriers for community members unfamiliar with academic norms. Simplifying these processes helped increase accessibility.

The dual responsibility CRLs held to both their communities and the academic team was demanding, but necessary for translating research into culturally relevant action. Obtaining informed consent, particularly parental consent for younger participants, was a significant task. CRLs received specific training to handle this process clearly and respectfully, supporting participant understanding and confidentiality.

As in Bends et al.'s (2013) work, the CRLs' effectiveness was supported by their pre-existing relationships and lived experience in their respective communities. These localized relationships meant that each CRL role evolved uniquely, reflecting community-specific needs. For example, program structure and transportation barriers differed between the two community sites. This reinforces the idea that CRL roles cannot be generalised across diverse Indigenous communities.

Another key contribution of this project was the establishment of youth and community governance structures. Beyond CRLs

representing community needs, governance bodies like the YYAAC and CATs shaped the project through continuous input from community voices. Feedback from the centres also helped align the research approach with community practices (Edwards et al., 2008; Salvador et al., 2024; Kurtz et al., 2024). Future projects should establish clear mechanisms for addressing concerns or conflict raised by participants or the community. Boyd (2008) suggests that these structures can mitigate power imbalances and maintain collaboration during difficult moments.

Strengths CRLs Bring to Research

While challenges exist, the CRL role brings numerous strengths that enhance research impact and sustainability. CRLs address both logistical and social needs, such as transportation or emotional support, which ensure youth are able to participate in programs and feel included. Anticipating and responding to these "micro-needs" strengthens trust, cultural connection, and long-term engagement (Teare et al., 2024; Edwards et al., 2008). The lack of stable, long-term funding remains a barrier to role sustainability. Though CRLs sometimes faced challenges, such as the limitations of temporary contracts or the demands of balancing multiple roles, their ongoing

presence in community provided continuity and trust.

The CRLs intermediary role ensures respect for both academic and community needs, producing outputs aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing (Bends et al., 2013; Salvador et al., 2024) and increasing the likelihood of research being translated into meaningful community outcomes (Kurtz et al., 2024).

Cultural relevance was also strengthened by integrating local language and cultural practices into activities, which deepened youth connections to culture and identity. Elder mentorship, cultural access, and intergenerational relationships also proved empowering. The IYW project supported these connections, both youth-to-youth and youth-to-Elder, with CRLs playing a key role in maintaining relationships even after programming ended. These strengths demonstrate how CRLs not only contribute to the success of projects like IYW but also help redefine what meaningful, community-driven research looks like in practice.

Conclusion

The evolving role of embedded researchers like CRLs reflects a meaningful shift toward community-led and Indigenous research rooted in trust, respect, and shared responsibility. In this project, CRLs brought

leadership, adaptability, and deep relationships that kept the work closely aligned with community strengths, priorities, and lived realities. Their presence helped challenge Western research hierarchies by modeling approaches that were reciprocal, relational, and grounded in local knowledge. In doing so, they supported culturally safe research practices and helped create space for communities to guide their own research processes in ways that center their voices and experiences.

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About the authors:

Positionality and reflexivity are important practices in relation to Indigenous research paradigms (Lavallée, 2009; Wilson, 2003). As a team comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, we recognise that our diverse perspectives and

lived experiences shape how we approach this work, how we understand our roles within it, and how we engage with the communities involved.

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