

COMING TOGETHER TO TALK WITH YOUTH

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION OF HOPE”

CHI PI KAAKI TOO YANG

An Abridged Version

Diversity Thunder Bay

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Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the main points of a report produced by youth about a project initiated by Diversity Thunder Bay (DTB) in 2019 at Lakehead University, which involves high school students in a day event to discuss serious issues facing youth in our city. The report is produced by 32 youth editors and compiled by the RMYC past President Wendy Wang (see Acknowledgements page 26). The topics that were discussed in this project “Coming Together to Talk with Youth – A Community Conversation of Hope” were chosen based on a film titled “*Coming Together to Talk*” produced by Michelle Derosier of Thunderstone Picture. The documentary features Indigenous youths from Northwestern Ontario First Nations talking about their experiences in the City of Thunder Bay. The documentary focuses on the racism and other challenges these young people face as they struggle to survive in the community. During the event, the film would be viewed first to raise awareness on these social problems that marginalized Indigenous youth encounter in the city, followed by small group workshops to discuss and respond to questions about the issues emphasized in the documentary and beyond. Subsequently, the youth were asked to come up with their own ideas to address these problems.

The paper summarizes the main points raised in these discussions, especially the ones revolving around the issue of safe spaces in Thunder Bay, and what youth propose as solutions and recommendations on how to improve youth safety within the city. By drawing on the thoughts generated by youth on topics such as discrimination, reconciliation, youth safety, social skills and meaningful work, the city will have a valuable source of information about youth and their experiences and their safety in our community.

What follows is an introduction of the chair of the organizing committee. I start with this introduction, in its entirety, because it provides the readers with a good synopsis of the whole

report. Subsequently, I highlight the main points of the different areas listed in the table of contents, which were dealt with in the report.

INTRODUCTION FROM CHAIR OF THE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE OF “COMING TOGETHER TO TALK WITH YOUTH”

It is with great excitement that the Organizing Committee for “Coming Together to Talk with Youth – A Community Conversation of Hope” presents this report. The event took place on April 30, 2019 at Lakehead University, bringing together students from Lakehead Public Schools and Thunder Bay Catholic School Boards, Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, and Matawa Education and Care Centre. Representatives from school boards and education authorities were members of the Organizing Committee, together with Lakehead University, Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre, Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC), Diversity Thunder Bay, the City of Thunder Bay, as well as others referenced later under Acknowledgements on page 68 [page 26 in this paper]. We are proud that the report was written in a collaborative manner with members of the RMYC and author of the report, Lakehead University student and past president of the youth council, Wendy Wang. It is in fact the voice of youth.

The event brought together students in a setting that was safe and accepting, and all group discussions were facilitated by youth for youth. Only Elders were invited into some of the sessions. None of the adult organizers or teachers were part of the youth-led discussions. This made it a unique experience and for many Indigenous students, it was their first opportunity to be able to talk about, and share difficult experiences of racism in a setting of only their peers. First Nation students from remote northern communities and newcomer students were present as well.

Non-Indigenous students participated, many of whom had never been exposed to racism or commented that they did not understand how seriously it affected their peers.

The facilitators spent many days studying and becoming familiar with the material that was prepared by one of the co-producers of the film “Coming Together to Talk” – Ardelle Sagutcheway. Working together with Anika Guthrie from Lakehead Public Schools, they created the workbook for the facilitators.

Michelle Derosier, filmmaker of “Coming Together to Talk” in a December 2016 interview with the CBC Radio at the premiere showing of the film in Thunder Bay explains: “I would love to have people who are interested, committed, and care about Indigenous young people and their lives, and bettering their lives in this community. I would like to see them in the seats Friday night.” she said. “And then for us to develop some strategies that will be led by the young people about how we in Thunder Bay can make this city safer for them.” Ms. Derosier’s comments highlight why the Communications and Education Committee of Diversity Thunder Bay brought their idea to the greater community to make this event happen. It was that committee’s original intent to listen to the youth and give them an opportunity to tell us, the adults, how to make our City the one we all want – a safe, vibrant, culturally diverse and accepting home for all – especially those who currently, tragically, do not find it safe. In reading the report, know that these words are the voices of the youth. They range from those who experience racism, to those who have invested in combating racism with their work at the RMYC, to students who learned about their peers’ reality. It covers a vast scope.

As the Organizing Committee met, it became clear that the event would raise awareness of the Seven Youth Coroner’s Inquest, specifically Recommendation 116, which calls on named parties to work together to increase public awareness in the City of Thunder Bay regarding the

issues raised during the inquest, including the obstacles, challenges and racism faced by First Nations students from remote communities residing in Thunder Bay. The City of Thunder Bay, a key sponsor of the event, also supported the development of the film “Coming Together to Talk.” We are all proud of the youth who facilitated, gathering the information the students discussed, and developed recommendations for a more inclusive and safer Thunder Bay.

Youths from the RMYC also saw that the event could help them get closer to their goal of creating “The Thunder Bay We Want” inspired by delegates they sent to “The Canada We Want Conference” in Toronto earlier in the year. The youth are working on making the City more welcoming, accepting and inclusive, and this was within the reach of the event. The adults on the Organizing Committee were continually impressed and excited by the contributions of the youth during our meetings. It was the youth who suggested that we must have ‘Hope’ in the title. It was indeed a conversation of hope.

When reading the report, please bear in mind that the youth themselves are proud of having their voices heard, their experiences read about and shared, and are especially delighted to be the authors of this unique youth-centric document from an event that gave them an opportunity to share and feel empowered. It is now up to all of us to study their recommendations and work with community partners to make Thunder Bay truly a safer and inclusive place for all.

Ellen Chambers,

Chair - Organizing Committee, “Coming Together to Talk with Youth, A Community Conversation of Hope”

Chair - Communication and Education Committee (Diversity Thunder Bay).

Event Outline

Coming Together to Talk with Youth – A Community Conversation of Hope is a project initiated by the members of the Education and Communication Committee of Diversity Thunder Bay. Diversity Thunder Bay (DTB) comprises individuals and representatives who work towards a diverse, inclusive and equitable community free of racism and discrimination of any kind (further details, DiversityThunderBay.ca). The members of DTB strive to make Thunder Bay a welcoming and safe place for all individuals and groups regardless of their backgrounds. On April 30, 2019, Diversity Thunder Bay's Education and Communications Committee, along with collaborating agencies (see Acknowledgements, page 26) organized a conference for secondary students to discuss a number of areas, including safe spaces and improving Thunder Bay's youth safety, particularly Indigenous youth. High school students from Thunder Bay schools were invited to participate. Students from Lakehead Public Schools, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board and Dennis Franklin Cromarty Secondary School and Matawa Learning Centre participated. Participants received wristbands to identify which small group workshop to attend during the conference (Wang, 2019:10). Chair of the Education and Communications Sub-Committee of Diversity Thunder Bay, Ellen Chambers welcomed delegates followed by Regional Multicultural Youth Council Co-Presidents, Yamaan Alsumadi and Heran Zhao (Wang, 2019) in welcoming all participants.

Elder John Gagnon, who accompanied Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School to the event, opened the gathering. Following Elder Gagnon's opening, it was time to watch the film (Wang, 2019:10). Ardelle Sagtcheway introduced the film. Ardelle and her friends Casha Adams, Savanna Boucher, Talon Bird, Chris Ooshag and other First Nations youths came up with the idea to make a documentary about their lives. They discussed their personal experiences

as Indigenous youth studying and living in Thunder Bay, and the harsh reality of racism and discrimination within the city. Ardelle and friends also shared their ideas on several other issues, including what they were doing to turn things around to create something positive to help them in their struggle against racism (Wang, 2019:11). The film also relates the real stories of what Indigenous people are doing to support each other and create a sense of community in an urban setting (Wang, 2019:11).

The film explores the realities, experiences and feelings of Indigenous youth in Thunder Bay, and outlines how the youth would ultimately like to see positive changes in this community. The origin of the idea of the youth forum and the use of the film's title came about during the annual meeting of DTB and after viewing this powerful documentary – *Coming Together to Talk*. Following that, the members of the Education and Communications Committee of DTB felt that they had to do something about the racism that Indigenous youth face in our city. Rather than coming up with their own solutions to rectify this appalling situation—they thought that first they have to hear the voices of youth. They knew they needed to hear the voices of those who are marginalized in our community and to encourage youth from different backgrounds to come together. The committee wanted a safe forum to discuss and find ways in order to make meaningful changes within Thunder Bay—particularly regarding the issue of safe places for youth. The Diversity Thunder Bay Committee then invited members of the community to hear their input and a larger committee of people from the City of Thunder Bay, Lakehead Public Schools, DFC, Thunder Bay Catholic, the Indigenous Friendship Centre, the Regional Youth Multicultural Centre and others (see acknowledgements) met for several months planning the event.

Coming Together to Talk with Youth: A Community Conversation of Hope brought high school students together to discuss ethno-cultural relations and ways to move forward with reconciliation (Wang, 2019:14). The forum held at Lakehead University, began with the film “Coming Together to Talk” to provide the context for discussing difficult issues such as racism, safety factors in Thunder Bay, and the challenges Indigenous students face while attending high school in the city (Wang, 2019:14). First Nations communities in Northern Ontario send their Indigenous students as young as 14 years old to attend secondary school, a challenging prospect for such young students, as there are no secondary schools in the remote communities. Hence, many Indigenous students face culture shock and anxiety, among other things, when commuting from small, isolated reserves to a large multi-ethnic city in pursuance of their secondary education. The film exposes the ugly truth of what **many** Indigenous people and students face in Thunder Bay - racism, violence, safety concerns, and loneliness.

Some of the non-Indigenous students who participated in the discussion were unaware of the social problems that Indigenous people have to endure, and were taken aback by what they saw in this documentary. After viewing the film, students went to ten separate rooms for lunch and to begin discussions. Dennis Franklin Cromarty boarding students had their own private sessions (Wang, 2019:11). The facilitators made sure not to have any adults present in these workshops, because they wanted the high school students to speak freely about their experiences and to be able to discuss the problematic issues of racism in school and within the community (Wang, 2019:10). Elders were permitted in the break out rooms to provide support for students. The groups were youth-led, mostly by RMYC facilitators, who (along with the planning committee) made sure to create a peer group environment that is safe and conducive to having meaningful discussions.

Questions for the groups were determined by the facilitators in sessions led by Ardelle Sagutcheway, one of the youths from the film, and Anika Guthrie, First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education coordinator with the Lakehead Public Schools. Both women are Indigenous. Students responded to questions about the film – anything new they learned and ideas and suggestions for what is needed to make the city safer and more welcoming. The workshops were lively and covered a host of areas including the misconceptions about Indigenous people in Canada, and the myths, stories and feelings of First Nations students coming to the city for their education. The facilitators encouraged participants to express their opinions freely in the safe space of break out rooms, to share their stories of lived experiences, and how they saw things from their perspective. Students were asked to come up with ideas to make things better. Indigenous students compared the film with their own situation and experience. Non-Indigenous students were challenged to reflect on what they saw and the familiar stereotypes they had experienced or heard about.

The desired outcome of having such a discussion was to understand the troubling problems of racism and discrimination and how to combat them as well as how to create an open and respectable environment for youth in Thunder Bay. There were note takers in every session and the notes, and information was gathered from the various workshops. Students provided valuable knowledge of creating a just and fair community and safe spaces for all youths. Indigenous students also discussed solutions and strategies and provided noteworthy inputs to ameliorate their community (Wang, 2019).

Comments and Analysis

Many thoughts and feelings were shared about the film and its connection to the issues and concerns surrounding safe spaces for Thunder Bay youth including:

- Thoughts on the Film
- Thoughts on Reconciliation (TRC)
- Youth Safety in Thunder Bay
- Racism, Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination
- Work Skills, Life Skills, and Social Skills

The above areas identified essential points of discussion because of their impact on youth. Although there are many other points of emphasis within the original report—compiled by the RMYC past president Wendy Wang and the thirty-two youth editors (as mentioned earlier)—the selected take-away moments from the event in this paper are, first and foremost, in relation to the discussions of safe spaces for youth in Thunder Bay. The original report also focused on other significant areas within Thunder Bay itself which are relevant to the discussion and creation of safe spaces, such as over/under policing, the justice system, and child welfare.

Thoughts on Film

Youth in the various workshops were able to connect well with the film and its different topic and highlighted the poor ethno-cultural relations within Thunder Bay. The film also brought many important issues to the attention of non-Indigenous youth involved in this event. For instance, non-Indigenous youth pointed out that they had no idea about the two-tier funding system where federally funded Indigenous schools receive less money than provincial schools (Wang, 2019:14). This was shown clearly by Dr. Cindy Blackstock, “who visited the DFC” and took the federal government to court over the fact [that the latter] “gives on-reserve First Nations children 38% less funding than non-Indigenous youth anywhere else in Canada”. Although Blackstock won the case in 2016, changes are still outstanding, and Indigenous children are still suffering due to the lack in funding (Wang, 2019:14).

Many non-Indigenous students did not know that there are no high schools in most First Nations communities, and that Indigenous students in northern communities had to leave home for secondary education (Wang, 2019:14). Non-Indigenous students also learned from the film about the numerous issues that Indigenous communities face. These areas include under-funded welfare and children programs, gaps in many other services, as well as the existence of poor infrastructure, which results in poor housing and road conditions, and lack of clean drinking water, etc. Issues such as these underscore areas of difficulties for many Indigenous communities, in which the film revealed to the viewers at the event and opened up thought-provoking discussion on matters surrounding safe spaces for youth (Wang, 2019:11).

Thoughts on Reconciliation

When discussing reconciliation in the various workshops, students had divided opinions on whether or not reconciliation was happening. For reconciliation to occur within Thunder Bay, some students felt that the community would need to honour treaties, remove the barriers to equity, and end racism (Wang, 2019:14). Students felt that more open and honest dialogue is needed between people regarding discrimination and ethno-cultural relations. Further, they pointed out that in order to have a peaceful dialogue, ignorance, stereotypes, fear, and hate have to be left behind.

During the workshops, Indigenous students identified areas of concern that caused distrust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These issues were:

- “Colonization, Residential Schools, the 60’s Scoop, Broken Treaties, Exploitation
- Intentional destruction of Indigenous cultures, languages, and ways of life”
- Skin colour, White supremacy and White privilege

- “Past experiences that make Indigenous people have negative opinions of non-Indigenous people.
- Broken promises with governments and procrastination on court decisions.
- Resource extraction on traditional lands without fair compensation.
- The expropriation of traditional lands and the exploitation of their natural resources.”
- The contamination of Indigenous land and water due to the impact of industrial development on their land: Pipelines, mining, flooding, clear-cutting...
- “Funding wars and costly weapons that cause suffering instead of investing in people.”
- Greed and materialism and how they “*clash with spirituality and respect for nature.*”
- “*Eurocentric/Christian beliefs that other cultures and religions are not (as) important*”
(RYMC Report, Wang, 2019:15).

Youth Safety in Thunder Bay

The topic of youth safety was centred on Indigenous youth in Thunder Bay and their transition from reserve to off-reserve life. According to Indigenous youth, the lack of safety concerns on the reserve were due to social issues relating to poverty, addiction, run-down buildings, and lateral violence (Wang, 2019:16). When moving to Thunder Bay for their secondary education, youth felt that the city was worse than their own communities **with** respect to **the issue of safety**. Some non-Indigenous youth also commented that they did not feel safe in some regions of the city as well (Wang, 2019:16). However, Indigenous youth felt that they were easy targets for violence and exploitation due to their racial background. Indigenous youth commented that they were repeatedly told that they did not belong here and that strangers would even approach them to tell them to “go back home” (Wang, 2019:16). Indigenous girls also indicated that they would be often regarded as *prostitutes*, making them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. There were even forms of lateral violence from more urbanized Indigenous youth who would prey on the younger Indigenous students (Wang, 2019:16). In

addition to these experiences, where Indigenous students felt unsafe in the city, the news **coverage** often display acts of violence against Indigenous people, ranging from messages written on buildings to criminal incidents involving Indigenous people. These actions produced anxiety amongst Indigenous youth about their presence and their safety (or lack of it) within Thunder Bay and made their parents to be quite concerned. More importantly, these concerns over the lack of safety factors were underscored in the report of the Coroner's inquest into the death of the seven First Nations youths (Jethro Anderson, Reggie Bushie, Robyn Harper, Kyle Morrisseau, Paul Panacheese, Curran Strang, and Jordan Wabasse) in the city (Wang, 2019:17). First Nations parents are shocked by how their children are perceived and treated within the city, and wanted to stop sending their children to Thunder Bay and instead look for other smaller communities such as Dryden.

Racism, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination

As presented in the film, stereotypes, racism, prejudice, and discrimination are prevalent in schools and across the city. From the multiple workshops at the event, many students from all backgrounds expressed their experiences within Thunder Bay about racialized incidents. Indigenous students explained that when out in public and interacting with others, they feel that the historically racialized stereotypes are still present, which made them feel undesirable and unwelcomed. According to them, incidents of blatant racism in which Indigenous students were referred to as "red Indians" can be traced back to colonization and the Canadian Indian Act (Wang, 2019:22).

Racist incidents were also experienced by Black and Muslim students and other racialized/ethno-cultural groups including Chinese Canadians, South Asian Canadians.

For instance, Black Canadian students spoke about name-calling and the derogatory “N” word, and were put-down and sworn at (Wang, 2019:23). Racist incidents were also reported by Muslim Canadian students:

“Girls who wore the hijab were ridiculed and teased as terrorists, even though [as refugees] they were fleeing for their lives from terrorism, Islamophobia... and religious radicals.... Comments [which revealed false assumptions] about Muslims and the threats of violence...and utterances that refugees were coming here at tax-payers’ expense...were common” (Wang, 2019:22).

Many racialized students pointed out that they share similarities in their experience of racism, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, and in how they are stared at, the verbal abuse, they receive, and how they are treated in public spaces. One student describes the impact of these social problems “as a cage that restricts your movements, access, opportunity, participation, and happiness in society ” (Wang, 2019:24).

Social Issues

Within the separate sessions for DFC students, there were discussions about other social issues affecting boarding students in Thunder Bay. The inter-generational trauma of residential schools and how it contributes to a host of social problems faced by Indigenous communities was addressed in their session. In addition to the reserves’ economic concerns, Indigenous students emphasized that “broken families, parenting skills, dysfunctional families, abuse, and addictions are social issues that are shattering their communities” (Wang, 2019:31). Despite the problems concerning life on the reserve, moving away from home can also create feelings of loneliness for students and anxiety for the extended family networks and community members

left behind. Boarding homes also become an issue for indigenous students. Those who reside in good caring homes have a higher chance of doing well in school and have fewer city problems. Some Indigenous students, however, struggle with academic issues, mental health, and addiction. Furthermore, if they drop out of school, that may have negative effects on their financial situation and their social stability, and it may increase the number of homeless and destitute in the city.

Ensuing the thoughtful and lively discussions on these social issues and concerns, the students came up with the following suggestions:

- “Have a safe youth-friendly shelter in Thunder Bay with staff and volunteers who connect well with the youth, especially those at risk. Secure accommodation and a youth ‘detox’ with caring staff is an urgent priority.
- Provide counselling services with Elders and appropriate cultural and spiritual guidance to deal with mental health and addiction problems. On-going after-care is needed to build resilience and sustain their healing journey.
- Link the youth with tutors and other academic and social supports to better their chances of graduating and following a trade or professional career of their choice.
- Work with the police, social service agencies to connect the youth to healthy supports, skills-development training, including life and work-skills to thrive and survive in the city” (RMYC Report, Wang, 2019:32).

Work-skills, Life-skills, and Social skills

Developing a work ethic, self-confidence, and commitment to do well in school is critical for all students when progressing into adult life. Indigenous students discussed their difficulties with culture shock and barriers when moving into an urban environment. Some Indigenous students have a similar experience to new immigrants and refugees immigrating to Canada. “Students leaving reserves are merely changing geography and bring along values, attitudes, behaviour patterns, and mannerisms they have been raised with. Some of them lack urban life

skills and require assistance to adapt and learn how to use urban services such as public transit and other services not available on reserves” (Wang, 2019:33). First Nations reserves’ life and nature are quite different from a large modern city, providing new difficulties for Indigenous students compared to their lives in remote communities and reserves. (For further details, Wang, 2019:33). To combat this issue, students believed that the youth-to-youth approach used by Natural Helpers in schools and the RYMC’s Ambassadors/Peer Mentors at DFC are proactive ways of training, empowering, and supporting the youth. Positive influence through peer leaders and role models is an effective strategy to teach new habits, modify behaviour, and motivate action to achieve change (Wang, 2019:33).

Suggested solutions/Recommendations

The outcome of the numerous discussions in this project, “Coming Together to Talk,” is that youth want to see Thunder Bay develops into a community that accepts everyone, celebrates diversity, and respects the lives of all human beings. To do this within the city, students emphasised that community members need to unite and work towards this common goal. With this in mind, students who attended the event came up with solutions and recommendations on how Thunder Bay can provide a safer community for youth, which would also promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples including racialized/ethno-cultural groups. (Wang, 2019).

Students pointed out that investment in creating safer neighbourhoods for youth is essential. Ideas for building drop-in youth centres, after-school programs, and stay-in-school initiatives were seen as ways to improve safer areas. Although Thunder Bay has a few youth centres and after school programs such as—New Hope Youth Centre, Boys and Girls clubs, Kairos Community Resource Centre, and RMYC—resources are nonetheless limited and—these

centres cannot consistently provide around the clock care or—provide an environment that is safe for youth throughout the day (Wang, 2019). Some youth centres are not always located nearby the residences of the targeted youth. Although the students from the event have provided great insight into what the community could do to provide a safer environment for youth in Thunder Bay, the larger picture of a safe space still needs further discussions. Social support and community centres are essential for Indigenous youth because those supported spaces provide a safe environment and limit discrimination and racism. However, to truly create safe spaces for Indigenous youth and minorities in Thunder Bay, ethno-cultural relations and reconciliation efforts need to develop further and include serious discussions of the areas of stereotypes, prejudice, racism, and discrimination. As Carl E. James (a professor at York University) explains, stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and discrimination are based on ignorance about others, a lack of awareness of differences, which in turn breeds “fear” based on the supposed “strangeness of others” (2003). Our community needs to be proactive in combating prejudice, racism, and discrimination. The students are hopeful that City of Thunder Bay will provide the necessary safe spaces by building centres that are more appropriate and by having qualitative mentorship programs for youth.

During the workshops, some youth have indicated that even though they are classmates in school, everyone has their own identity and group that they naturally form. When topics such as racism, homophobia, discrimination, addiction, mental health, obesity, and poverty are discussed in class during school hours, some students do not feel comfortable or safe to express their opinions about these issues. (Wang, 2019:49). The “*Coming Together to Talk with Youth*” event provided students with a safe space to meet and mix with others. It helped create an inviting dialogue to discuss *these difficult* issues and hear the different voices on these matters—that they

may have never felt comfortable doing before. “By discussing the creation of safe spaces for youth, students were able to come up with recommendations and suggestions that can engage youth through peer leadership development and community strategy” and drew on the following to help them achieve these goals: “Thunder Bay Children’s Charter, boards of education, Diversity Thunder Bay, and the RMYC/Youth-led initiative during the workshops” (Wang, 2019:45).

Safe spaces are ideal for having an honest discussion on any issue and great for cultivating ideas that marginalized **and** vulnerable young people want to share. However, safe spaces are more than physical structures. They involve creating a warm, nurturing, and respectful social environment where everyone feels welcomed, included, accepted, and gains a sense of belonging. Friendship, empathy, trust, respect, and confidentiality are promoted with the goals of having fair treatment, advancing social justice, and treating everyone equitably. The creation of safe spaces will positively affect young people’s lives and foster equitable relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Wang, 2019).

To build on the success of the event at Lakehead University, students came up with the following recommendations for improvements.

1. SAFE SPACES FOR YOUTH

Youth, regardless of their backgrounds, need safe and positive spaces to meet and mix, talk openly without being put down, laughed at, judged, and discriminated against. The “Coming Together to Talk” “event provided a warm, accepting, welcoming, and inclusive [environment] for the youth to get together and communicate freely. It allowed them to have their voices heard, express opinions, share ideas, and make suggestions [on] issues they face.” This type of

environment is also more significant for Indigenous students from rural areas who are not comfortable in opening up and speaking in public with non-Indigenous people (Wang, 2019:44).

Safe spaces are ideal for having an honest discussion on any issue and provide great opportunities for marginalized **and** vulnerable young people to talk about their experiences and the challenges they face. They can also provide a secure base for youth to plan and organize their own activities and help them to realize their full potential and develop their talents. Having safe spaces will make them feel comfortable and nurture their mental health and well-being. They can develop their capacity through training, counselling, receive guidance, supports, and access to relevant information to help them make wise choices and responsible decisions. Safe spaces can be a catalyst for producing the change youth would like to see. The community can also use the space to meet with youth and engage them in dialogue (Wang, 2019:44).

2. ENGAGING YOUTH THROUGH PEER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Mostly, youth communicate far better with their peers than those outside of their generational gap, making it easy for them to understand what is going on. Therefore, training youth as peer leaders is an effective way to connect with other young people. Young leaders who use positive influence to promote healthy lifestyles, good habits, good behaviours and character are important role models for other young people to emulate. Positive peer relations can empower young people to change harmful lifestyles and focus on prevention-oriented initiatives (Wang, 2019:45).

Some youth have the ability to get things done but lack practical experience. Feedback from the RMYC members involved in the event acknowledged the need to provide training for youth to learn suitable communication and organizational skills so they can become better

facilitators and presenters “to lead interactive group discussions, plan activities, prepare work-plans, run programs, evaluate outcomes, and write useful reports” (Wang, 2019:45). Youth leaders would require help to build self-confidence so they can approach marginalized, vulnerable, and disenfranchised youth, and give them a voice and engage them in meaningful discussions that yield positive outcomes, so they can be part of the solution to the problems they face (Wang, 2019:45).

Allotting adequate funding for youth and helping them develop their leadership skills, as well as investing in safe spaces and appropriate organizations for youth is an investment in our future. Young leaders who are well-informed, and self-confident can be role models to counter negative peer pressure and motivate other youth to take action and create the change they would like to see (Wang, 2019:45).

3. COMMUNITY STRATEGY: THUNDER BAY CHILDREN’S CHARTER

Thunder Bay City Children’s Charter and the Child Advocate were established by City Council on June 4, 2004, to ensure that the beliefs and values enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children were maintained at the municipal level in co-operation with other orders of government. “The Children’s Charter guides what Thunder Bay can do to enhance children’s and youth’s well-being. It aims to improve living conditions for all children, reduce situations that make them vulnerable, support them to stay in school, help them to be healthy and feel safe, and lay the foundation for a better and prosperous future” (Wang, 2019:46).

Accordingly, the City’s Child Advocate can play a leading role in monitoring progress in relation to the Thunder Bay Children’s Charter. Moreover, acting on Seven Youth Inquest

Recommendation 116, “The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence,” which calls on named parties to work together to increase public awareness in the City of Thunder Bay regarding the issues raised during the inquest, including the obstacles, challenges and racism faced by First Nations students from remote communities residing in Thunder Bay”, will help the city to move in the right direction to achieve progress on these matters (Wang, 2019:47).

4. BOARDS OF EDUCATION

The writers of the report recommend that School Boards read the report to review what was discussed in the workshops. Although these writers acknowledge the progress that has been achieved over the years, especially in relation to promoting “diversity and safe spaces for Indigenous, 2-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer (2SLGBTIQ+) students,” they feel that “more work still needs to be done **to** stop racial discrimination, Islamophobia, bullying, and gender-based violence. More action should follow the land acknowledgements to show that Indigenous people matter, and we must reconcile” (Wang, 2019:48). The students further recommend that:

* Assemblies and homeroom announcements ought to be used frequently to inform students about the policies and practices in places such as Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting School Act. Doing so will help remind them of the procedures to make schools more inclusive, welcoming, accepting, and safer for everyone. Time should be set aside at the beginning of each school term to familiarize students with the code of conduct and discuss grievance procedures to involve students in the solution to the problems they face.

* School principals continue to explore new ways to inform students about what boards of education and schools are doing to make all students feel included, welcomed, accepted, and safe. Teachers continue to educate students about curriculum changes and explain the reasons as part of the education process. Regarding Indigenous content, knowing the real history of Canada is essential for the foundations of reconciliation.

* Publicly display posters with the school’s code of conduct and complimentary “messages about inclusion, acceptance, and equity, to inform and remind all the students about creating a welcoming and safe climate. Leaflets with the do’s and don’ts—to promote good school behaviour and—what to do when you see, hear or witness racial, homophobic, violent, or

bullying incidents—should be provided to educate, inspire, motivate and empower students to take appropriate action” to improve the situation and make a difference in the school climate.

* Schools can train students as peer mediators by introducing “sharing circles and [restorative] justice practices to: handle misconducts, deal with racist incidents” and bullying behaviours, and...prevent violence, and the need to retaliate and alleviate the fear of revenge. “Such initiatives may be developed as course credits to sign up, receive training, and complete the assigned tasks.”

* Teachers should continue in their good work and struggles “to making classrooms safe spaces for all students (particularly the marginalized...as well as racialized and groups) so they can talk freely about problems...concerns, fears and challenges they face.”

* Schools need to continue to provide teachers the support that is needed to:

- Manage new and complex issues in the classroom,
- Share success stories,
- Follow best practices and reconciliatory approaches
- Create a learning environment
- Connect with diverse students and
- Deal with school safety issues.

* More support is needed for teachers to create materials and develop resources that they need to implement a curriculum that complements true multiculturalism, diversity, and reconciliation. Doing so will further enhance teachers’ cultural competency to deal with the trauma, mental health, and learning challenges that are unique to Indigenous students, which will improve their graduation rates.

* School boards should utilize local resources such as “*Coming Together To Talk*,” “*Walk a Mile*,” “*Seeking Bimadiziwin*,” and other films that initiate discussion on social issues from an Indigenous perspective. School boards should incorporate more Indigenous and land-based approaches to learning and sharing knowledge.

* Schools should continue to work with child-welfare agencies to reduce the cross-over effect and liaise with the police, social and health services to support vulnerable students to stay in school. There is a need to reduce the negative stigma about in-school feeding and clothing programs and to introduce after-school extra-curricular activities and tutoring services to enhance academic performance and level the playing field for all students (Wang, 2019:49).

5. DIVERSITY THUNDER BAY

Diversity Thunder Bay initiated this forum with the intent to build on what transpired so it can be a catalyst in the creation of safe spaces for youth and to keep playing a role in contributing to the progress of our community. In order to do that, it was necessary to hear the

voices of youth on areas that are important to them and provide them with the opportunity to discuss discriminatory practices and ethno-cultural relations in the community, as well as challenge them to develop solutions so they can achieve the Thunder Bay they imagine and want for the future.

The RMYC has been part of The Lakehead District School Board's Youth Embracing Diversity in Education (YEDE). YEDE has provided opportunities for students to focus on diversity and social justice issues, promoting true multiculturalism, and building bridges of understanding to achieve reconciliation and equity. According to the writers of "Coming Together to Talk", they believe that this project complements what YEDE has done for several years, but it was also able to involve more students and a) focus on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations; b) ways to raise awareness and understanding; c) learning to get along and enhance reconciliation (Wang, 2019:51).

It is recommended that Diversity Thunder Bay (DTB) as the lead group of this initiative, strengthen its links with the various institutions referred to in this project and develop a follow-up plan of action. There needs to be a strategy to implement ideas, suggestions and recommendations from the forum to make sure that youth voices are heard and acted upon. It is also recommended that DTB work with the Lakehead District School Board and explore ways to collaborate in co-hosting any future events (Wang, 2019:51). This can be another "Coming Together to Talk" as part of or in place of YEDE. A joint venture with stakeholders will pull resources together, show interest in working with the youth, and support their involvement in reconciliation and social justice issues to create a fairer and more equitable society.

It is also suggested that Diversity Thunder Bay continue to liaise with the City of Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee to publicize the work being done

to improve ethno-cultural relations. These organizations should also jointly approach Thunder Bay City Council to create a special fund for local groups working to combat racism and discrimination in the city (Wang, 2019). “Dedicating funds to fighting racism will improve the chances of waging effective anti-racism and racial harmony campaigns”. The Education and Communication Committee (Diversity Thunder Bay) should lead the way and continue exploring opportunities to engage youth to advocate for safer spaces for kids and teens. Furthermore, to continue networking with partners including institutions such as schools, social service agencies, the police—to support further the ideals of true multiculturalism, diversity, equity—and mobilize the general public to play an active role to improve reconciliation (Wang, 2019:52).

6. THE RMYC / YOUTH-LED INITIATIVES

With the involvement in planning, organizing, facilitating, and preparing the “*Coming Together to Talk*” report, the RMYC will work on student issues and collaborate with other partners to address problems that impact youth. The RMYC would like to serve as an inclusive voice for youth, to:

- Consult them regularly
- Amplify their priorities,
- Represent them on advisory boards and committees
- Advance their interests and concerns and
- Mobilize them to act accordingly and create the Thunder Bay we want (RMYC) (Wang, 2019).

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