Indigenous and Latinx Youth Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic:

A Participatory Research
Exploration of Resiliency in
Tkaronto Communities

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r20B86CRm90>

Luisa Karime Gonzalez

My name is Luisa Karime Gonzalez, I am 18 years old, and my pronouns are she/her. I identify with the LatinX community. I am currently finishing up my first year of a Bachelor of Social Work at Ryerson University. Over the time participating in this project I have come to value our team and their unconditional support with every little step and accomplishments. I believe the future is filled with uncertainties and can even cause anxiety for a lot of people, especially now.

Envisioning Future: Based on the article we submitted I envision that people will learn to value and even seek community support. With the research presented and the ongoing situation with Covid-19, community support will become a necessary coping need for people of all ages in these unprecedented times.

Jaden McGregor

My name is Jaden McGregor, and I'm an 18-year-old Toronto and Waterloo based Indigenous and Jamaican photographer, traveler, entrepreneur and youth researcher. I'm also in my First Year at the University of Waterloo studying Geography and Aviation to obtain both my pilot's license and a degree in environmental studies. In November of 2019, I joined the YPAR Program because I felt like it would be an interesting program to attend and to learn from and connect with other Indigenous and Latinx Youth as well as offer my unique perspectives and to further build my skill set.

Envisioning Future: What I envision for the future for Indigenous and Latinx youth is a future that both hears and listens to the voices and the ideas of Indigenous and Latinx Youth, as well as accommodates the needs of these youth. Lastly I hope to see the results of research as a stepping stone into more research into Indigenous and Latinx Youth.

Lida Valeria Pineda Flores

My name is Lida Valeria Pineda Flores, I was born in Mexico and came to Canada when I was 7 years-old. Both my parents are of Mexica (now called Aztec) descent. My family and I lived undocumented in Canada for 12 years before receiving status. Growing up as an “illegal” I experienced injustice and discrimination but was also introduced to many services, programs and communities that brought my attention. I loved the work that non-profit organizations did for people like us and I decided to pick a career that can allow me to work for marginalized and vulnerable communities. I also questioned the justice system, the immigration system and the impacting history of colonialism, and what I can do as an ally to support and work with all the affected communities. In May, I will be fulfilling my dream of working as a Social Service Worker Program to work with marginalized and vulnerable communities and do my best in supporting individuals, families and communities.

Envisioning Future: I envision Future as a world that is decolonized, equal and just to all. I envision all advocates, researchers, writers, journalists, protestors and overall all allies celebrating all the successes that have been done throughout history.

Lainey Rios

My name is Lainey Rios. I am 18 years old and identify myself as Latinx as my family originates from Mexico. I love to learn, spend time with family, and enjoy being involved in my community or in other programs, like YPAR. I am currently in my first year at the University of Guelph. I am a bachelor of science student in the biological science program. I am currently working towards achieving high grades, expanding my knowledge in the science field and completing my

undergraduate degree. I enjoy the sciences because it relates to everyday life and helps build my understanding of the world we live in.

Envisioning Future: Based on the article our team wrote I believe that power, strength and resilience can be gained by the Latinx and Indigenous community in the future. I strongly believe our research as a whole allowed students to feel empowered and heard, which allowed them to cope better with the pandemic. Even though these were not our initial intentions, after feeling empowered ourselves by participants we strongly drove to push this idea of providing students with the resources they need to feel empowered themselves. I hope our work can be a source of motivation for more Latinx and Indigenous youth to create a community for each other and do amazing things together.

Annie Silva

My name is Annie Silva, I am an 18-year-old Latinx University student in the social science program. During the time that I was a part of executing our project, I have learned many things and have opened my mind to how different people's lives are apart from mine. It seems like an obvious concept however, when you are surrounded with people living similar lives to yours as well as the lack of interaction due to the pandemic you do not have a chance to see these differences.

Envisioning Future: After analyzing our data, I believe that in the future people will continue to show resilience and initiative towards future challenges. Both Latinx and Indigenous participants showed their own level of struggles and problems during Covid-19 and on the other hand, they all demonstrated their unique ways of coping and pushing forward to manage

and resolve as much as possible these occurrences. For this reason, I strongly believe that further down the line Indigenous and Latinx youth will have the capability to continue to be resilient. As well, these youth will not only be resilient with their own lives, they will come as a community to help, teach and provide resources for others to be courageous and resilient during tough times.

Kaitlind Peters

I'm a member of Aamjiwnaang First Nation in Sarnia, Ontario. I am a current doctoral student in Curriculum and Pedagogy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. My research focuses on Indigenous and reconciliatory education. I have a strong passion and dedication towards improving Indigenous education and working for the improvement of Indigenous communities. In this specific research, I was the project lead responsible for coordination and dissemination efforts. My role was to recruit and to both engage and support Indigenous and Latinx students in the development of Participatory Action Research projects focused on decolonial and Indigenous methodologies.

Envisioning Future: I envision Future to see continued multitudes of resistance against colonial structures led by Indigenous and Latinx youth advocates striving toward community change. A Future that centers the voices of Indigenous and Latinx youth in developing grassroots approaches to advancing Indigenous and Latinx autonomy, education, and Nations.

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandez

My name is Rubén (pronounced Roo-BEN) Gaztambide-Fernández, and I am a 49-year-old, cis-gendered male identified, Boricua of African and Basque descent from

the Caribbean island of Borikén/Puerto Rico. I work as a Professor at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education and I am the Director of the Youth Research Lab and the Lead Researcher of the Youth Solidarities Project. As a temporary guest in the territory known as Tkaronto, I endeavor to work and live in good relations with the Indigenous people of this land and to contribute to the project of Decolonization both here and in my land of origin. My scholarly work focuses on the relationship between solidarity and creativity and I work to create opportunities for young people to generate knowledge about their own experiences.

Envisioning Future: Drawing on my experiences learning with the youth researchers as an adult facilitator in this project, I envision a future where young people have access to the resources to continue generating knowledge about their own experience and to share that knowledge with other youth and with the community at large. I see this kind of participatory research as a community resource, and I work to expand opportunities for access and opportunities to continue doing this work. I also envision a future when I can return to my land of origin and contribute to the work that young people are doing there against racism, ableism, capitalist exploitation, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and colonization.

Pedro Morón Bonilla

My family and I are first-generation Salvadorian refugees and diaspora living on Vancouver. I am currently a PhD candidate in Social Justice Education and Diaspora & Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies. From a diasporic land and place-based perspective, my doctoral work focuses on the Forced Migration of Salvadorians and our arrival on to Turtle Island;

specifically, how first-generation Salvadorian Diaspora, Refugees and Exiles cultivated land and place-based relationships on Turtle Island and how these land and place-based relationships have interleaved Salvadorian Diaspora, Refugees and Exiles into the apparatus of Canadian Settler-Colonialism. I have worked on a myriad of BIPOC-centered projects resisting and studying Canadian Settler-Colonialism and State-Sanctioned structural violence against BIPOC communities.

Envisioning Future: I envision the Future as one where Indigenous, Latinx youth (and BIPOC youth, writ large) have the structural supports, services and spaces (physical and virtual) that not only cultivate their own communities and community relationships, but also support their agency in cultivating the present and futurities which they, BIPOC youth, understand and desire. Researchers, facilitators and mentors, like myself, are here to support that present and future.

Michael Carlson

I'm Michael Carlson. I'm a teacher at the Toronto District School Board working at the Urban Indigenous Education Centre working with Indigenous youth from grades 9 to 12. I have a diverse background of work experience including policy analysis, dramatic arts, scientific research, politics and outdoor education. For fun, I am currently trying to make financial education more accessible as a financial planner (QAFP). And my Indigenous ancestry comes from the west coast where I'm mixed Interior Salish and connected historically to the Osoyoos Indian Band.

Envisioning Future: The future exists at the behest of made of specific outcomes, each of which are governed by the factors and forces of the present, including chaos and probability. From an Indigenous world-view

lens, the future is the natural continuation of a larger cycle, or series of cycles, as all our relations in the natural world dance together to the rhythm of the earth's heartbeat.

Abstract

In this article, we share the findings from a participatory research project we conducted during the summer of 2020. The study focused on how a group of Latinx and Indigenous youth in Tkaronto, also known as the Greater Toronto Area, navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. As a team of youth researchers and adult facilitators, we conducted virtual focus groups using visual methods with a group of peers from a larger youth participatory project. During the focus groups, we asked questions about the challenges that the young people face because of the COVID-19 pandemic and what strategies they developed to deal with these challenges. We analyzed the data using thematic analysis of transcripts and visual analysis of artifacts. We found that the main challenges youth described were related to online schooling, mental health, friends and family relationships, and feeling stuck at home. Youth described many strategies for dealing with these challenges, which included leisure and exercise activities outside, creative outlets such as writing, drawing, and composing music, and engaging in sharing stories about their experiences with others. In this article, we summarize how we decided to pursue this project, why it was important, and how we went about collecting and analyzing the data. We also summarize our analysis and findings, and we explain how we decided to share the findings from our project with the broader community in a participatory manner.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on communities around the world, but this impact has not been equally distributed (Gravlee, 2020; Walters, 2020). The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 on those living in Long Term Care and low-income and racialized communities has been well-documented (Hsu, et al, 2020; Randolph, 2020; St-Denis, 2020). However, few researchers have examined the impact of the pandemic on young people, perhaps in part because the virus appears to have a milder impact on healthy youth (Courtney, et. al, 2020; Fortuna, et. al., 2020; Götzinger et al., 2020). Yet many young people, particularly those from marginalized communities, have been disproportionately affected by the social impact of the virus (Cohen & Bosk, 2020; Jenkins et al. 2021). In the United States, a report from America's Promise Alliance states that "young people are experiencing collective trauma fueled by changes in their immediate circumstances combined with ongoing uncertainty" (Margolius et al., 2020, p. 6). The report shows that the impact is related to isolation and lack of engagement in schools, feeling less connected to adults and peers, and the economic uncertainty brought about by the pandemic (Margolius et al., 2020). Additionally, the impact of living with parents who are frontline workers and who are more likely to catch the virus has been devastating on young people (Lee et al., 2021).

The research on the impact of COVID-19 on young people paints a dire picture, yet there are limited opportunities for young people from marginalized communities to share their experiences of the pandemic and to describe their own strategies

and coping mechanisms. The existing literature tends to rely on a deficit view of young people, describing them as victims and focusing narrowly on the systemic challenges that exist for many Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) youths. In an article advocating for the particular needs of Indigenous youth in Canada, for instance, Ineese-Nash (2020) focuses mainly on the struggles and the challenges that many Indigenous youths are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the author attempts to describe Indigenous youth from an abundance perspective, it still paints them with a broad familiar brush as a suffering minority.

While the challenges documented in the literature so far are important, it is necessary to recognize the resources and the coping mechanisms that young people, and in our case specifically Indigenous and Latinx youth, have developed to remain strong in the face of the pandemic. This requires a different approach to research, one that puts young people, their interests, and their voices at the forefront of the research process. According to Efuribe et al. (2020), young people have the right to be placed at the centre of any research that seeks to serve them. Following the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Efuribe and colleagues assert “that it is a fundamental human right for youth and young adults to participate in designing the programs and policies aiming to serve them” (p. 16). However, most of the research studying the impact of COVID-19 on BIPOC communities is designed and conducted without the direct participation of BIPOC youth (cf. Arnold, 2020; Efuribe, et. al, 202; Walters, 2020; Courtney, et. al, 2020; Fortuna, et. al., 2020; Wilkerson, et. al. 2020; Singer & Rylko-Bauer, 2020). Doing research on rather than researching with BIPOC youth where young adults are equitable partners in conceiving, developing, designing and implementing research aimed to serve them is, in effect, a violation of the UN Convention on

the Rights of the Child (Efuribe, et. al, 2020, p. 16).

Hence, from its very inception, the design and method of our Youth Participatory Action Research project situates Indigenous and Latinx youth as co-researchers that take the lead in conceiving, designing and conducting research. The desire to focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the design of the research were defined by the youth researchers themselves (who are also the first five authors of this article). The role and praxis of the adult co-researchers (who are the last four authors of this article), who are also Indigenous and Latinx themselves, was to coordinate the research project, mentor and “develop [the] critical knowledge and [research] skills” of the Indigenous and Latinx youth as co-researchers (Efuribe, et. al, 2020, p.16). The key research question guiding this study is, how do Indigenous and Latinx youth in Toronto describe their experiences dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic? In addition to answering the above question, this article describes the project we developed together, outlines our analysis and findings, and summarizes the initiatives and web-based resources we developed.

Methodology: Participatory Research During (and About) a Pandemic

This project was born out of our interest as Latinx and Indigenous youth researchers and adult facilitators to share our experiences during the pandemic and learn from other youth peers about how they were coping with the challenges presented by the COVID-19. We were particularly interested in the notion of resiliency and how other youth dealt with the sudden challenges of the lockdown, being isolated at home, online schooling, and social distancing rules. Our work as Indigenous and Latinx youth researchers

and adult facilitators is grounded in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and evolved out of a year-long project as part of the larger Youth Solidarities Project. The Youth Solidarities Project is a school-based YPAR project and a collaboration between the Urban Indigenous Education Centre (UIEC) of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Youth Research Lab (YRL) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto¹. In this project, we explore our own lived experiences and develop research tools to make sense of the challenges we face as young people in schools. Prior to our research on the COVID-19, we collectively developed research projects with an emphasis on decolonial and Indigenous methodological approaches. These projects explored questions about stereotypes, Indigenous knowledges, cultural appropriation, teachers' backgrounds, gender violence, and conceptions of home.

After completing our group projects, a smaller group of youth researchers and adult facilitators continued to work together, but our work was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic when we had to move all our meetings online and some members of our team could no longer participate. After several online meetings and brainstorming, we decided that it was important to continue to work together and to explore how other youths were navigating and dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 on their lives. We decided as a group to pursue this question by engaging other members of your YRL community of youth researchers as participants to answer the following questions: how do Latinx and Indigenous youth in the city of Tkaronto describe their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic? More specifically, what challenges do the Indigenous and Latinx youth in our project face and how do they describe and manage these challenges?

¹ For more information about the YRL, see <https://youthresearchlab.org/>

Coming up with these questions involved a long process of consultation and several virtual meetings during which we talked about our own experiences and considered different avenues. Moving online required that we also adapt our modes of communication and shift our focus and strategies for developing research projects (Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). From the very beginning, our research team knew we wanted to research the topic of COVID-19, and we began by writing our own personal stories about our experiences during quarantine, which led us to the incorporation of storytelling into our research. This was an essential process that led us to refine our research strategy and methods. Stories are not only a way to make meaning and to share collective experiences, but they are also an essential part of our cultural heritage, both as Latinx and Indigenous youth (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2010; Simpson, 2011). As Simpson (2011) asserts, at its core storytelling is a method of decolonization, and it is a “lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism, where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice” (p. 33).

As we learned from our own individual experiences, we decided that we could invite other members of our larger team of youth researchers, all of whom identify as Latinx and/or Indigenous youth, to participate by sharing their stories. Overall, we intended to create a space of empowerment for other Latinx and Indigenous youth facing the challenges of these difficult times by creating opportunities not just to share our stories, but also to make connections and to share resources and strategies. To that end, we embraced storytelling as an Indigenous methodology that allowed our team and the other youth participants to express themselves while coping with these difficult times (Archibald, 2008; Simpson, 2011).

Continuing the work, we started with the YRL,

we decided to do our work in a participatory manner as YPAR. YPAR is an approach that allows researchers and participants to work collaboratively towards an end goal and to empower those involved (Bautista, 2012; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Johansson & Lalander, 2012; Morrelle, 2008). We felt this was important, as the COVID-19 has caused many people to face restrictions and this was a way for youth to express how they felt while connecting to others like themselves. This type of research also aims to provide a platform to engage with other youth going through the same thing to share and create conditions to gain new perspectives and foster empowerment. In many ways, our work as YPAR also became a strategy for navigating the challenges of COVID-19, as we sought to develop a project that would support our own community of youth researchers by focusing on what matters most to them (Efuribe et al. 2020).

For this project, we sent an open invitation to previous members of our YPAR project and based on their responses we formed five small groups, keeping a balance of different gender identifications as well as between those who identified as Latinx and Indigenous. We facilitated focus group discussions with the five groups, each including at least two youth researchers and two or three youth participants from our larger YPAR team. We conducted the focus groups over Zoom, with two youth researchers serving as facilitators and one adult facilitator who provided technical support and guidance. Drawing on our own experience using Zoom for virtual meetings, we decided that no more than four participants and two researchers would work well for the focus groups to feel more personal and to give everybody a fair amount of time to speak without interruptions. We also decided that forty-five minutes to an hour was a good amount of time to engage in conversation without becoming too tired of the technology (Baker & Murphy, 2021; Dos Santos Marquez et al. 2020; Valdez &

Gubrium, 2020). This decision was made by taking into consideration the difficulty in staying focused over zoom and allowed the youth facilitators to be conscious of time and better organize questions. The youth participants were asked to share a visual artifact that in some way represented their experience during COVID-19 and to tell a story related to the artifact. The artifacts and the stories became the anchors for the focus group discussions. The stories were followed by conversations driven by the artifacts in their personal stories as well as follow-up questions.

The artifacts brought in by participants varied in terms of genre, format, style, materials, and medium, and included photos, journals, photo albums, drawings, maps, and paintings. Some artifacts were created by the youth themselves using different art forms, while others were objects that were obtained throughout quarantine and that had some symbolism. This strategy enabled us as facilitators to provide a structure, as “asking participants to create visual artifacts can provide anchors during the conversations” (Wilkerson et al. 2014, p. 567). Artifacts allowed for a transition into talking about coping mechanisms and how participants managed their own situations during the pandemic.

Each focus group was recorded and transcribed by the youth researchers on our team. The transcribed data were analyzed using coding and thematization as described below. Once all the transcriptions were done, the entire team carefully reviewed the transcripts, taking notes and identifying themes based on similarities and contradictions between participants, as well as identifying key quotes to illustrate those themes. As a team, we gathered via Zoom several times to discuss our impressions and analysis of the transcripts, and these discussions led to more ideas and ways of connecting across themes before arriving at a clear set of conclusions drawn from the data. In

the next section, we summarize what we learned from the focus groups before describing the two projects we developed to share our findings with the public, including the digital story that accompanies this article.

Findings: Challenges and Strategies

Through our analysis of the focus group transcripts and the visual artifacts, we identified several general themes, which revolved around the topics of online school, mental health, relationships, and space. We learned that as schools moved online, many of the youth had to learn to adapt to the online learning environment. How young people felt and adapted to online schooling varied, and for some, it was a good experience while for others it was difficult. This range of experiences is consistent with other research on the experiences of youth with online school (see Arnold, 2020). One of the youth researchers, Valeria, expressed that she felt relieved that the pandemic happened when it did because at the time she was really tired and stressed out from school and work. However, other youth disagreed with Valeria's assertion and expressed that the online environment was "not for everyone" and difficult. Tina, a Tkarronto Indigenous student who was a senior in high school at the time, expressed the struggles she faced during her last semester of high school,

This is my last semester and I was supposed to graduate, but because of COVID we had to do work online, it wasn't working out for me and I failed the class. So now I'm in credit recovery and it's really annoying because I was supposed to graduate.

The feeling of frustration about not being able to graduate or, for those who did graduate, but were unable to celebrate graduation is captured in the

following visual artifact from Aleida, a youth participant who is originally from Mexico:

Many students also expressed their difficulty to focus and prioritize school while facing a pandemic, which has also been documented in the research (Margolius et al., 2020). Luisa, a Latinx youth researcher from El Salvador, described the challenge this way: “You have to sit down, focus on your work, and I was really mentally and just not in a place where I could just calmly sit, do my homework, focus on that.”

This led to conversations around the effect of the COVID-19 on mental health, which is not surprising given that so much of the research on the impact of COVID-19 on youth has been focused on mental health both in the US (Arnold, 2020) and Canada (Jenkins et al. 2021). As expressed in the quote above, many of the youth were not mentally prepared to focus on anything, especially school. The youth in the focus groups shared that the struggles of online school caused a lot of stress, which affected their mental health. They felt unmotivated at home with nothing to do. Kim, a Latinx student who was born in Colombia, shared her story during the focus group and noted that she suffers from asthma, which caused a great deal of fear for her and her parents since the virus can cause serious respiratory issues. “It scared me a lot,” she explained, “and my parents wouldn’t let me go out.” The fear and anxiety she developed during quarantine put a great toll on her mental health: “the only air I was breathing was what’s inside. So, I just started having a lot of panic attacks and I wasn’t able to breathe normally.” The COVID-19 forced Kim to stay locked up at home with only her thoughts, so she became “more scared of being inside because the panic

attacks were horrible” compared to the actual virus. To summarize her feeling about mental health, Kim offered the following artifact to illustrate her feelings of anxiety and depression:

Whether it was small or big, all the youth in the project shared how their mental health has been affected by the pandemic. At the same time, as we discuss below, they also shared how they dealt with this and the strategies they developed to overcome this challenge.

The youth also shared how their relationships with family and friends were impacted significantly during COVID-19, especially during the first lockdown. For instance, Jaden, one of the youth researchers and an Indigenous student, shared that he was unable to see his sister for many months:

my sister, she was with my grandparents for four months from the start of March to, I don't remember exactly when, but I didn't have the chance to see her. So that was very different for me, very hard.

Lainey, a youth researcher whose parents are from Mexico, stated her frustration when butting heads with her parents, saying, “like I live in a, not that small apartment, but between like, four people, I have to share a room with my brother. And so, I don't really have my own time alone.” Adriana, who was born in

Ecuador, voiced that a parent in her household tested positive for COVID-19, which had a major effect on their family.

By contrast, some youth participants viewed their relationships with family to be prosperous and saw the pandemic as an opportunity to get close to them. This was an important finding, as most of the literature presents a picture of young people feeling depressed and isolated (e.g. Cohen & Bosk, 2020; Courtney et. al., 2020; Fortuna, et al. 2020), yet our research shows that youth were also proactive and felt connected to those around them. Adriana, whose father caught COVID-19, expressed that her relationships with her family got stronger during lockdown orders and that she felt closer to her family than ever before. Daria, a Latinx youth from Puerto Rico, shared the following photo of her parents as her visual artifact, and she said:

my relationship with my family has gotten so much better. And although everyone's going through a hard time, I feel like there's always positives in things. I'm super thankful for them, the help that they've given me and the opportunity I have to better my relationship with them.

Youth shared similar kinds of comments about relationships with friends. While friendships were also challenged, several youth participants argued that connecting with friends became a coping mechanism in dealing with the pandemic. Youth researcher Luisa described how sharing music with friends helped her during the COVID-19 pandemic. She said, “if I really like a playlist, I used to send them the playlist if they asked me or even if they didn’t ask me. Like Latin music that I like that is relaxed or they could use it to dance to it.” Katie, an urban Indigenous student, corroborated Luisa’s point when she voiced the extra importance of being a friend to others during these times. She said, “if you have a friend you could support them by talking to them whenever they need someone to talk to, I guess like being able to be willing to help as much as you can.” Her words speak to the sense of fortitude and resourcefulness that was echoed across our research and contrasts with the deficit perspective documented in the literature.

Space also emerged as a significant theme through our data, both as a challenge as well as a coping strategy. We learned that space played a significant role in the lives of Indigenous and Latinx youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as it was related to their mental health, their relationships with family and friends, and online schooling. While discussing space, many students expressed being “stuck in their homes.” Kim, who shared her experiences with depression, described herself as being “a prisoner in my own home,” as the lockdown and social distance restrictions caused many students to deal with their anxiety in isolation.

However, the youth in our research developed coping strategies to deal with their anxiety and feelings of isolation through utilizing outdoor spaces, particularly for physical activity, something Jenkins et al. (2021) found was a common strategy. Alex, an urban

Indigenous student, opined that he “found comfort and some peace in being able to go out and connect to nature, which in all of this has been a constant.” Annie, a Latinx youth researcher, also commented on how nature was helping her. “I don't really have a backyard and I live, like a minute away from a big park, so it's nice to like, escape and like, be outside,” she explained. Annie’s artifact, which is an image from Google maps that captures her path around a park, illustrates the importance of space.

Students expressed that going on walks, sitting in their backyards, or exercising outside was a way to connect with nature and with themselves. According to researchers Ettekal and Agans (2020), these kinds of leisure activities “can be leveraged during the pandemic to support positive youth development” (p. 2). Yet our research shows that young people are already engaging in these activities, whether with the support of adults or not, showing that they have the agency and the capacity to develop their own strategies for coping with the pandemic.

Space was also relevant in how the pandemic created challenges within family and friend

Google classroom and Google Meet. The online classroom environment was very new to students and was hard to navigate and adapt to. Some youth expressed that they lacked the confidence to contribute to classroom discussions as they were not comfortable with speaking in that space. Several students also stated that they struggled to stay focused on the classroom material and received minimal help with work comprehension. Another challenging factor of online school related to space that students voiced was at-home distractions, such as video games, siblings, phones ringing, or other uncontrolled factors that were not usually present in the school space.

When it came to sharing coping mechanisms, the most common strategies that the youth identified involved creative outlets, connecting with family and friends, going outdoors, and sharing stories with others. Many of the youth described how creative activities like painting, drawing, photographing, and composing music were essential tools through which they could express themselves and manage their feelings. Alana, a Chilean youth participant with Mapuche ancestry, shared an artifact of herself at

home using computers to compose music, which was her own way of creatively dealing with the sense of isolation.

In fact, as already stated, technology was an important way to connect with friends and spend time with families, which was an important way to cope, find distractions, and not feel so alone.

Going outside to get fresh air, exercise, and escape the confines of the home was also very important. "I love looking outside," shared Lauren, an urban Indigenous youth, "just the greenery immediately calms me down

and it gets me to, uh, a point where I can really start to rationalize my thoughts without overthinking them.” The importance of being outside is also captured in the artifact shared by Jaden, which shows a group of friends spending time outside while maintaining social distance:

Lastly, youth commented on how the very act of sharing their stories with other youth through the focus groups that we organized was a great way to process the challenges of the pandemic. They expressed that the experience allowed them to feel a sense of community and let them know they were not alone. In this sense, our work as a research team was itself a strategy for navigating the challenges of the pandemic. After conducting the focus groups, many of the youth researchers and participants mentioned that the questions and their reflections on the challenges that they and their peers faced definitely helped them see the bigger picture as it had been difficult knowing how others are coping with COVID-19. Jaden, for example, said,

We're all in this together. We have a lot of the same struggles, but also differences. It's important to listen to those struggles and hear the differences. I think it's important to try to move forward together. As one group,

I as one people and, um, at the end of the day, we're gonna make it through this, to the end.

The experience of hearing the stories of peers became an important source of support and connection, both for us as well as for the rest of the youth that contributed to this research. Echoing the argument made by Efuribe and colleagues (2020), this finding underscores the importance of engaging young people around the questions and concerns that matter most to them. It also underscores the power of using creative approaches to engaging youth from different communities to better understand each other and to support themselves through the challenges of the pandemic (see also Vitt, 2020).

The Way Forward: Sharing our Work

Once we identified the themes we discussed above, the research team decided to split into two working groups to work on different strategies for sharing our findings with the public. This is an important part of YPAR, as it is a way to turn the research into action that contributes to our communities more broadly. The first initiative was the creation of a website to help Latinx and Indigenous students stay connected and share experiences with each other and the public². This website responds to the finding from our work that is connected to other youth, including our work in this research, was an important strategy for navigating the challenges of the COVID-19. As part of the website, we also plan to establish a podcast to disseminate our findings. The website and the integrated podcast are intended as a space for other Indigenous and Latinx youth, as well as any other youth that may want to join and express themselves freely. We wanted to have space where youth in our communities can feel connected to one another and where they can interact with their peers to

² For more information, see <https://indigenoulatinxyp.wixsite.com/indigenoulatinxypar>. The website and podcast can also be accessed through the YRL website, at ypar.ca.

share their life stories of resilience. This virtual space is a safe place allowing youth to communicate and express themselves through visual art, writing blogs, virtual hangouts, and podcasts. We hope that this will allow other youth to come together and talk about their feelings and experiences and how they are dealing with the COVID-19. We created the virtual space in response to what the youth in our work expressed regarding their desire to talk to and connect with other youth as a coping mechanism. We drew on the strategies they shared, particularly the importance of creative outlets, which is a primary focus of the virtual space we are creating.

The second initiative was the creation of the digital story that accompanies this article. For this digital story, we worked with all of the visual artifacts we collected and created a composite narrative based on the stories that the youth shared during focus groups. Three youth researchers in this team, Luisa, Annie, and Lainey, co-wrote the composite story that weaved the many experiences that the focus group participants had shared, putting them all together into one narrative. To accomplish this, we worked together to imagine a composite character who would narrate the stories shown by the images, told in the present tense, as if they were living out a day during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach helped us to ground the story in the experiences that youth shared and our own personal stories. We attempted to create a story that both acknowledges the challenges while at the same time recognizes the many ways that we collectively discovered and created to support each other. Throughout the development of the narrative, some images were needed to be reordered to fit the storyline. However, one image of a house floating in mid-air attached to balloons, which was created by Luisa, stood out as the image to represent the overall project. To further demonstrate the cyclical and repetitive nature of the current reality, we decided to

both start and end the image sequence with this painting of the house floating in the air. Once we finalized the collective story, each youth recorded a part of the narrative, and we used the online tool Prezi to animate the visual transitions between photos. We compiled a video using the pictures and narrated audio, then edited it with the help of mentors specialized in video production. The video is a creative expression of what we learned through this work, and as such, it is also our own way of making sense of how the COVID-19 has impacted us as a community. Our hope is that this digital story will also become a tool for other youth as well as organizations as evidence of the power, agency, and resourcefulness of Latinx and Indigenous youth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research presented in this article explored how a group of Latinx and Indigenous youth researchers in Tkaronto navigated the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. We were interested in learning from the members of our youth research team about their experiences during the first four months of the pandemic, focusing on how they described their personal resiliency and how they adapted to the challenges of the pandemic. We conducted this research with a group of youth researchers involved in a YPAR project in collaboration between the Youth Research Lab (YRL) and the Urban Indigenous Education Centre of the TDSB. We collected our data primarily through five focus groups, which allowed participants to both feel included in the discussion and heard. This fostered a sense of community and inclusion, which allowed the youth researchers to share their experiences in a way that contrasts with the existing literature. This existing work primarily focuses on researching youth from a deficit perspective, neglecting how Latinx and Indigenous

youth have shown resilience and strength in adapting to the challenges of the pandemic.

Based on a thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts and visual analysis of the artifacts, we identified four themes related to the experiences of the youth participants. First, the youth identified online schooling as a significant challenge. Second, they pointed to their relationships with peers and family as an important aspect of their experience, both as a challenge as well as a source of strength. Third, through our research, we learned that Indigenous and Latinx youth desire spaces where they can share their struggles with COVID-19 and receive support from other youth. Fourth, we found that storytelling was an important tool for individuals and communities to relate and connect to one another and to feel heard and understood on their own terms. Through storytelling, our research in and of itself became a tool for community building for all the youth involved as well as for the adult facilitators who accompanied the group in our journey as researchers.

Drawing on our findings, our research became a tool for rewriting the deficit narrative that dominates the current research on the impact of COVID-19 on young people in general and BIPOC youth in particular. The picture painted by this scholarship is detrimental to Indigenous and Latinx youth because it does not emphasize the resilience and the strength that has been present during the COVID-19 pandemic. This narrative of the deficit does not focus on the stories of Indigenous in Latinx youth, which are in and of themselves inspiring and uplifting. Discovering this was important for us and we wanted to highlight this in our work and research.

Indigenous and Latinx youth want spaces where they can share their struggles and their successes during these challenging times, which is

something that none of the literature that focuses on deficit and damage emphasized or talked about. Instead, this work focused on how the pandemic was affecting the youth rather than how the youth were dealing with being affected by the pandemic. Latinx and Indigenous youth, like any other group of young people, are not exotic beings that need to be studied from the outside. We are your neighbours, your friends, and we are strong and resourceful. For us, the importance of connecting, creating space, and sharing stories are still as persistent as it was during the summer of 2020 when we conducted our research. Going forward, our work underscores the importance of highlighting the voices as well as the many stories of all youth. This requires approaching the challenges faced by youth not from an outside perspective looking in, but from an insider perspective that is built on relationships with and an opening to the needs, interests, and strengths of young people. We hope that this article, the website we created, and the visual story that is linked to this article will inspire other youth to find ways of connecting with and supporting each other.

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