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## Wâhkôhtowin: The Governance of Good Community–Academic Research Relationships to Improve the Health and Well-Being of Children in Alexander First Nation

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## Abstract

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a promising decolonizing approach to health and social sciences research with First Nation Peoples. In CBPR, the use of a community advisory committee can act as an anchoring site for trusting reciprocal relationships, collaborative decision-making, and co-learning and co-creation. Through a qualitative case study, this article illustrates the collective experiences of a well-established, multidisciplinary, and intersectoral committee that reviews, monitors, and guides multiple research projects in a First Nation community in Canada. Participants of the Alexander Research Committee (ARC) share examples of the value of fostering a high level of commitment to building both positive working relationships and learning spaces that ultimately result in research and policy impacts for their community.

## Keywords

community-based participatory research, child health, child well-being, First Nation, school, decolonizing research

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## **Wáhkóhtowin: The Governance of Good Community–Academic Research Relationships to Improve the Health and Well-Being of Children in Alexander First Nation**

First Nations peoples are often concerned that research findings will stigmatize community members or portray them in a negative way. Health research conducted by non-Indigenous researchers has, until relatively recently, been a colonial practice resulting in the stigmatization and discrimination of First Nations and other Indigenous Peoples (Willows, 2013). Historically, health research has advanced negative stereotypes, divorcing health statistics from discussions of the social determinants that underlie health and socio-economic inequities such as poverty, unemployment, low educational attainment, inadequate access to health services, lack of food security, and poor and overcrowded housing conditions (Beavis et al., 2015; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Loppie Reading, & Wien, 2009; Trumper, 2004). However, there has been a justified reluctance on the part of First Nations communities to participate in research that purports to address health and socio-economic disparities, as the direct benefits of such research to community members may not be apparent or because communities are skeptical that such disparities can even be addressed by research (Edwards, Lund, Mitchell, & Anderson, 2008; Willows, 2013). In Canada, First Nations children, along with other Indigenous children (i.e., Métis and Inuit) experience significant health and social disparities as a result of colonial legacies (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Smylie & Adomako, 2009). Colonialism is therefore an important determinant of First Nations children’s health (Beavis et al., 2015; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Smylie & Adomako, 2009).

Decolonizing ideologies and practices offer an opportunity for researchers to decenter the existing power structure of neocolonial research paradigms and knowledge production (Bermúdez, Muruthi, & Jordan, 2016). Decolonizing research that addresses important health determinants for Indigenous peoples, such as culture, family, community and self-determination, can be a powerful tool to improve the health and well-being of First Nations children (Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Irvine, Kitty, & Pekeles, 2012; Willows, Hanley, & Delormier, 2012). Through a strengths-based orientation, recognition of multiple ways of knowing, and focus on increasing self-determination and community determination, decolonizing research also has the potential to reinvigorate and revitalize First Nations cultures (Brant Castellano, 2004; Bull, 2010; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Pigford et al., 2013; Willows, 2013). Such research requires a shift away from positivistic scientific paradigms to constructionist positions, whereby researchers and community members co-create knowledge by designing and conducting research in collaborative partnerships that are based in respectful, equitable relationships (Bull, 2010; Kajner, Fletcher, & Makokis, 2011).

In Canada, community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach to conducting health and social science research with Indigenous Peoples that is predicated on trusting, reciprocal partner relationships, shared control over research projects, collaborative leadership and decision making, and methods, analysis, and dissemination planning that utilizes multiple forms of knowledge (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Castleden et al., 2012; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). As a promising approach to remove or challenge power injustices faced by vulnerable, disenfranchised, and/or misrepresented people in the creation of knowledge (Bull, 2010; Kajner et al., 2011; Schnarch, 2004), a number of First Nation community–academic CBPR partnerships now serve as exemplars for

successful and productive First Nation research (e.g., Cargo et al., 2008; Kakekagumick et al., 2013; Oosman, Smylie, Humbert, Henry, & Chad, 2016; Pigford et al., 2013). In its fullest manifestation as decolonizing research, CBPR could empower Indigenous Peoples to conduct transformative research that honors the perspectives, voices, and interests of their communities by enabling them to be not merely the researched, but also the researchers (Zavala, 2013). For this reason, it is necessary to report the best practices of how community and university co-researchers have come together to conduct sustained, decolonizing CBPR that empowers community members (Darroch & Giles, 2014).

We aim to contribute to existing literature about how community advisory committees can support CBPR research that is decolonizing in its aims, practices, and effects. The committee that serves as our case study is the Alexander Research Committee (ARC), which brought together members of a First Nation, academics, and non-community members to co-partner on research projects benefitting the education and health of members of Alexander First Nation (AFN) in Alberta, Canada. We describe how the ARC ensured that research resulting from a community–university partnership adopted a decolonizing approach. Quotations taken from interviews with ARC members are used to highlight how the ARC functioned, some of the factors that contributed to its sustainability, and how it benefited both community members and academic researchers.

### **The Case Study: Alexander First Nation Research Committee**

In 2006, a CBPR partnership aiming to prevent childhood obesity was conceptualized between academic researchers from the University of Alberta with expertise in nutrition (author NDW) and pediatric obesity and researchers from the AFN in Alberta, Canada (Pigford et al., 2013). In 2007, this partnership created a research steering committee, named the Wisdom Committee, to oversee a childhood obesity prevention research project. The committee was comprised of two academics and six employees of the health and education departments in AFN. The six employees included three community members and one non-community member from the Health Department, and one community member and one non-community member from the Education Department. For a detailed description of the early years of the partnership and development of the Wisdom Committee, see Pigford et al. (2013). Initially, AFN's Chief and Council provided a Band Council Resolution for the Wisdom Committee to oversee the research project. Over time, the ARC, as the Wisdom Committee came to be named, took on the responsibility of overseeing and participating in all research occurring at Kipohtakaw Education Centre (KEC), the community school for students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. The scope of research at the school included health and education activities related to nutrition education, food security, comprehensive school health, early childhood development, early literacy, and bullying prevention (Fehderau, Holt, Ball, Alexander First Nation, & Willows, 2013; Genuis, Willows, Alexander First Nation, & Jardine, 2015a, 2015b; Gokiart et al., 2014; Hanbazaza et al., 2015; Triador, Farmer, Maximova, Willows, & Kootenay, 2015).

The Wisdom Committee initially developed a document, titled *Guiding Principles*, outlining how committee members should function together, the rules of research conduct, and the fact that the community is the primary beneficiary of any and all research. The ARC subsequently refined the *Guiding Principles* document to reflect the latest edition of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [NSERC], & Social Sciences and

Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC], 2014). TCPS 2, a joint policy from Canada’s three federal research agencies, describes and encourages building ethical, reciprocal, and trusting research relationships with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. The document outlines:

- The rules of community membership;
- Values for working together;
- Decision making and meeting protocols;
- Rules for data collection, storage, and use; and
- Ethical conduct in relation to research.

Recognizing that a single document cannot address all of the possibilities and eventualities of the ARC’s relationships and work, and that research programs are likely to evolve over time, *Guiding Principles* is reviewed annually or as necessary to make certain that it remains relevant. In some cases, project-specific research agreements have been developed and appended to *Guiding Principles* to account for different funding and partner requirements, such as reporting, data ownership and stewardship, and knowledge dissemination.

The membership of the ARC has fluctuated in size and composition over its 10 years of existence, but it has always included at least three co-researchers working at KEC (e.g., teachers, a principal) and the community’s education department (e.g., the education director and assistant director, both of whom are members of AFN), along with one to three academic co-researchers and their trainees from the various CBPR projects conducted in the community. For decisions to be passed in accordance with *Guiding Principles*, the number of voting community members at a meeting must exceed the number of voting non-community members. Since 2007, the committee members have met monthly—except for July and August, when school is not in session. Each year, the ARC collectively assigns two co-chairs, one of whom is always a community member, which together share responsibility for chairing each meeting and responding to any concerns or issues as they arise. ARC members remain engaged with the community outside of the monthly meetings through additional meetings, special gatherings, or invitations to participate in community events (e.g., the health fair, events at the school).

Relational principles are the foundation of the ARC; for this reason, ARC members have discussed that the Cree concept of miyo-wîcêhtowin or “working well together” guides the way committee members make decisions about research that impacts the community. Wâhkôhtowin, a Cree word spoken by AFN community members, means “establishing good relationships.” Wâhkôhtowin encompasses more than simply relating to others; it provides the basis for individuals to function well together. Wâhkôhtowin can be conceptualized as a methodology for CBPR research that is decolonizing (O-Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004). Demonstrating that First Nations communities and academic researchers can effectively partner to produce decolonizing research through miyo-wîcêhtowin, the ARC can be considered an example of one of the “healing winds” (Irvine et al., 2012) that contributes to sustaining the winds of positive change in the research landscape. For this reason, we want to share our

collective learning about wâhkôhtowin and miyo-wîcêhtowin to inform other community–university research partnerships working toward sustainable and impactful health, education, or social change.

## **Methods**

This qualitative case study draws on multiple sources of data (interviews, a focus group, meeting minutes, discussions, observations by the authors, and document review) to describe and discuss ARC members' experience working collaboratively across CBPR projects in the AFN community. To engage in deeper reflection and capture the voices of the ARC members, interviews and a focus group were conducted. The research was reviewed and approved by the ARC, AFN community members, and the Human Research Ethics Boards at the University of Victoria and University of Alberta, Canada.

### **Interviews**

When interviews were conducted in the winter and spring of 2014, the ARC was comprised of 15 members, including cultural liaisons, an Elder, representatives from the band-operated health and education departments (teachers, a principal, the director of education, and a community health nurse), and university researchers and designated members (project coordinators, graduate students, and research assistants) from three CBPR research projects. Nine ARC members took part in semi-structured one-on-one interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour, which were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The participants' experiences sitting on the ARC ranged between 1 and 7 years (inclusive of experience with the formative work of the Wisdom Committee that preceded the ARC).

### **Focus Group**

Of the nine individuals interviewed, five took part in the focus group discussion that occurred after individual interviews. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to receive critical feedback on the organization and initial interpretation of the interview data from ARC members and to generate more in-depth data through exploring the themes presented to the group. The focus group was held at KEC, and was approximately 1.5 hours in length. The focus group was audio recorded and later transcribed. In addition, a graduate student took notes during the focus group.

### **Data Analysis**

A series of steps were carried out to analyze the one-on-one interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including reviewing the data, developing initial codes, searching for and then reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing a document outlining the themes that could be reviewed during the focus group. Initially, one researcher independently read the interview transcripts and notes and used memoing to document them (Mayan, 2009). An initial coding scheme that identified recurring phrases and concepts in the transcripts was developed and shared with two other researchers. Using the agreed upon coding scheme, the data was categorized into five themes, which were then presented for discussion during the focus group. The initial analysis procedure was not repeated for the focus group data; rather, the focus group was used to refine the themes and provide a clearer and richer description of them, which then resulted in a reduced number of themes represented by subcategories.

## Findings

This article will use a combination of qualitative data sources described above and author reflections to illustrate two key themes:

- a. Sustainability of the ARC, and
- b. Impacts of the ARC through capacity strengthening.

Discussing the first theme, we will unpack many of the processes that led to an enduring and respectful partnership across the membership of the ARC. Discussing the second theme, we will highlight the impacts that the ARC has had both within and beyond the AFN community.

### Sustainability of the ARC

The ARC is an example of a well-established, multidisciplinary, and inter-sectoral committee that reviews, monitors, and guides multiple research projects in a First Nation community. The sustainability of the ARC can be attributed to working relationally, the existence of community champions, committing time, a general willingness to co-learn, and the creation of a safe learning space.

An academic ARC member described the uniqueness of the ARC's composition and function:

Talking multi-sectoral committees in general, in my experience they are just a terribly rich way to work because they offer a space where people can, from those different sectors, can share their own individual viewpoints but it also provides a new space for people to then create a new sort of perspective on this issue that everybody has come to the table for . . . They challenge people's viewpoints and provide a space that's not normally there for people to dialogue about their own individual perspectives, the collective perspective and kind of pushing the boundaries sometimes.

ARC members often described working relationally with others as the foundation of their experiences, with one community ARC member stating:

We come together as equal partners, with different strengths and this work is predicated on trust. We've worked from the bottom up; our foundation is together and our base is on that trusting relationship.

Another academic ARC member described the respect that is inherent in the relationship, noting:

Of all the committees I sit on, there is more respect expected and received on that committee than any other committee I sit on. And it's not that other people are disrespectful it's just that the guiding principle of respect is extremely strong in the ARC.

Members of the ARC are committed and truly value the partnership that is central to the committee, noting that they actually want to be at meetings (as opposed to feeling obligated to attend). One academic member of the ARC reflected on this, remarking:

Making an effort to attend the monthly meetings also reflects on the strong principles of relational principles. I miss meetings all the time, but when I have to miss an ARC meeting I don't view it as just, "Oh well, they'll be fine without me." I understand that it demonstrates a lack of respect when I do not feel like I have time and I de-prioritize them. And it's not what I'm doing but it could be perceived as that and it would break my heart because I just have so much respect for that community.

In addition, one community ARC member described the committee's relational style of engagement, both in meetings and in the community:

There has to be trust; there has to be openness. There has to be a lot of communication; there has to be that willingness to go over and above just the research. I'll give the example of Eric [pseudonym] again, because he had a genuine interest in the community and a genuine interest in the people . . . He was at community events; all outside of work hours and I think that really impressed the people that there was willingness and a genuine interest. That's so critical in building relationships and wanting to start committees within a community.

Individuals who influence and promote relationship building in the community, which is critical at the start-up phase of any community-based research committee, are called "champions." Their influence is rooted in using their interpersonal networks to gain support for a project, while holding a clear understanding of the community's dynamics and needs. One academic ARC member commented on this, emphasizing the importance of champions to the research relationship:

With the ARC, there are some real champions, people who in the community who have been at every single meeting and valuing those people not just so that I can somehow label my research as community-based participatory research but valuing them, just the amount of time they put into something because they perceive that it's good for their community.

The community champion sees the benefit of CBPR to their community, as one academic ARC member described:

And just like any project you need to have a champion who's driven by the need to have respectful research done in their community that ties in with helping them in measuring what the goals of their community are.

ARC members also highlighted the importance of engaging decision makers on the committee, with one member affirming:

I think the key is getting those unsaid leaders at the table, or champions, but also some true leadership because they can also make stuff happen financially in a community or through the system.

Similarly, one community ARC member highlighted the advocacy role typical of a community champion:



I think more so being an advocate and a voice for First Nations community who has had, not just Alexander but general First Nations research has been research done *to* them and not *with* them. So, it was really critical to have good working relationships with the people that we were doing research with to ensure that First Nations voice, First Nations culture, First Nations history; our worldview is represented in that research. Our opinions matter and we're involved in every step of the process.

Champions are not the only individuals who are critical for engaging and maintaining good relationships within the community and with research partners, the ARC has many excellent models who, while attending ARC meetings, will say things like “this isn't working for me,” “we need to make a change,” and/or “here's what I need from you to be able to help me do my piece of this puzzle better.” These things are all spoken in a space that members have described as “trusting,” “welcoming,” “respectful,” and “caring.” For example, an academic ARC member stated:

I mean the ARC really has been co-created both by the community members and the researchers. It wouldn't exist in its form today without that co-creation. And it has evolved over time, you know, who chairs it, who takes responsibility of different aspects of the outcomes of those meetings. The research members from the community have made it very clear that they would like built into grants enough money so that they can present at conferences; the community has been included in almost all of my written work where the community will be named as an author, and I've had to write editors to say why, explain to them being that I do community-based participatory research. I have to honor the fact that our steering committee would like the community to be named as being responsible for the knowledge that comes out of the community. So, it's that we've really co-created how that committee functions together, we're sharing the responsibility now of talking to other people about how we work as a team.

The ARC's relational ethos cannot be understated in terms of its contribution to the sustainability of the committee; however, the ARC's functionality was also highlighted as a critical characteristic that contributes to the flow and sustainability of the ARC and to research in AFN. One academic ARC member likened it to a well-oiled machine, recognizing that administrative tasks and communication are important to maintaining the committee's momentum:

So, in order to make just our space and time together efficient and useful, we need to be working very diligently in the challenges in the background of communication, organization, administration; things that most people don't think about but when they're done well, things flow well and it makes it easier for everybody to work as a group. Then you can have that opportunity for richness and innovation and those things that come with having a well-oiled machine. And that's what the ARC has become really, is a well-oiled machine.

The ability to share resources across the many CBPR projects that the ARC may simultaneously oversee has supported the ARC's ongoing functions. Each project, depending on where it is in the research and funding cycle, has supported the co-chairs by identifying a graduate student researcher who takes minutes and circulates them and providing a meal during the meeting. Coming together over a meal is important to the relational nature of the ARC—as one ARC member from the community said:

I think one of the things is, well I'm going to be a bit of a humorist, if you offer food they come.

Likewise, another community member commented:

Being together that's essential. I think without food being there people would be not quite as inclined to come. You know? We break bread together, we share a meal.

In addition, the time that ARC members commit to the meetings and research-related tasks, as well as contributing to the community and critical events, was described in terms of the importance of time, the use of time, the allotment of time, and time well invested. One ARC member noted:

Giving of yourself and making time is part of the give and take nature of working relationally. We'll call each other, like, you know, 'cause it's that mutual benefit, it's like, "Hey, I need someone to come and do a guest lecture on this particular thing are you available?" The same is true in things like, "We need you to do something related to our school or community, can you make time for that?" Right so there is a lot of that give-and-take.

Co-learning has been identified as a principle and an embodied value of the ARC that is shared by all ARC members and contributes to the sustainability of the committee. As described by one community member, the ARC "is a table of learners, sort of, and everybody is committed and curious." Co-learning is both a process and an outcome of working in partnership. It is about learning together and from each other as equals, recognizing the unique strengths and skills of each member, and being transformed as a result of this reciprocal exchange of knowledge. Co-learning is rooted in both CBPR and Cree (and other First Nations) worldviews, as described by one Cree ARC member:

From a First Nation perspective, there's always an opportunity to learn, any given day from any given person and we see learning as lifelong learning so, it's not just out of a textbook or it's not just out of a test that you've done or anything like that. Every time we have a meeting there's definitely [an] opportunity to learn . . . through the overseeing of the research committee, there has been ample opportunity both from a researcher perspective and from a community member, on a daily basis. And not just in the research but in getting to know one another. I don't see learning just as textbook learning. Any given day of the year, any moment in a day, there's an opportunity for learning.

This informal learning was further described by another community ARC participant as the "unintentional" learning that happens when working in partnership with others:

And it is the deciding of the group how we're going to work with one another to learn from one another. And because there is no step-by-step process that does that; that's the process you go through to get where you're going to get. So, every week I co-learn something. Some of it is totally unintended learning you know, totally unintentional learning that I've learned.

At ARC meetings, partners openly discuss and negotiate ethical dilemmas, research processes, and mutual benefits, and they celebrate successes together. These conversations are not always easy, but members described the ARC as a safe learning space in which concerns can be voiced, questions can be asked, and guidance can be sought. One academic member noted that the ARC space allows for "getting advice from people and having that relationship where I could ask them very openly, 'you know, I don't actually know what to do in this situation.'"

A non-Cree member of the ARC noted that she was honored with the cultural learning she received as an ARC member and appreciated how this learning changed her understanding of Cree culture:

I think culturally I had a huge training/learning in terms of the Cree culture from central Alberta, and I was very honored to learn how do you show respect for information. What you do with information that is being given to you about the culture, and being mindful of that . . . Being mindful of the best responses to indicate that you recognize that the information you've just received is for you and that it is unique information. It's not just a conversation that just happened. There are gold nuggets in there for better understanding of their worldview.

At times, conversations may be uncomfortable and difficult, especially when touching on the wounds of colonialism or outsider–insider dynamics. However, the trust and respect that exists between ARC members, helped make these tough conversations, which are a necessary part of decolonizing research, opportunities for growth. For example, one community member stated:

We may not always agree on what is said. But we had that respect with one another so strongly that if we were uncomfortable with anything that was written [in a manuscript], that was respected and taken out.

Ultimately, for co-learning to take place in an authentic way, power disparities, which often permeate academic–community relationships, need to be addressed. Having a voice and participating in decision making requires all ARC members to be comfortable with the participatory research process. One community member emphasized how transparency on behalf of the academic researchers contributed to trust building and participation in the ARC:

So, we [community members of the ARC] felt comfortable. So, everything that they [academic members of ARC] said, like at the beginning of meetings, everything that they said was clearly defined and then we went on to the next project. We were never in the dark about anything.

One academic member of the ARC noted that doing CBPR is about letting go of being the expert on a topic or issue—as academic researchers tend to view themselves in conventional research—and accept their outsider status, remaining humble as they receive rich learning so that they might grow from it. This member affirmed:

I've become much more humble as a researcher, not just as a part of the ARC but just over the course of my career, that I'm not an expert. I come with a certain level of expertise, but I'm not an expert on anyone else's lives and no matter how often I have worked in Aboriginal communities, I will never be able to understand from a First Nations perspective what it's like to be First Nations, so really respectful of the fact that I have a lot to learn from other individuals and just the value of community-based research.

### **Impact of the ARC**

Over its 10-year duration, the ARC has impacted the following three areas: research and community capacity strengthening, quality of the research process and products, and school-level practice and policy.

**Research and community capacity strengthening.** Through their involvement with the ARC, members gain skills and knowledge about research, community, and cultural protocols, and how to work collaboratively. Co-developing research questions, selecting participant recruitment strategies, developing and administering surveys, collaboratively interpreting data, reporting back to the community or funders, and reviewing reports or manuscripts are examples of experiences that helped develop ARC members' collective research capacity. In addition, ARC community members are co-authors of articles published in academic journals and co-present at conferences. One community participant mentioned that through the experience of participating in research-decision making at the ARC meeting—whether about data collection, analysis or dissemination—she, like other community ARC members, gained important research skills:

I've learned a lot and my capacity in that area has really improved and I really am interested in that side of the whole application part and publishing of course, and naming a First Nation instead of an individual in publication. So, that was another give-and-take, another way that we had to try and work together because one person doesn't speak on behalf of the whole Nation aside from the chief, and so it's been an interesting process. Just in terms of staffing as well, I think it's been really critical for department staff. I only speak on behalf of their department, to be familiar with research; to understand focus groups; to understand review of manuscripts; review of developing questions; developing the right types of questions; testing questions, that's even been really interesting to me as well.

Another community member highlighted the ripple effect of this capacity strengthening, which transcends the boundaries of the ARC and informs each member's work in a holistic way:

But hearing the power of what other researchers find influences our program, so to me that's transference of knowledge, both directly as we sit in those presentations and as everybody is given that data. But the second transference is what does that mean for my organization.

For academic research partners, enhanced research capacity included a deeper understanding of how to implement CBPR, as well as cultural protocols and community engagement. One academic member of the ARC noted:

I've learned methods of engagement that I'm able to apply even within that committee and also to my other work.

Since more than one research project is active at any given time, researchers and graduate students have had multiple opportunities to learn from each other, capitalize on expertise that does not exist in their teams (e.g., measurement and survey development), and collaborate on other initiatives and work outside of the ARC (e.g., providing guest lectures in graduate classes, writing letters of support for scholarships, and providing references for students to gain employment).

To support the research process, community members are hired to work on research projects as community coordinators or research assistants. In one project, two community research assistants (CRA) were hired to go door-to-door in the community to share information about the project and gather informed consent. The CRAs received training in CBPR, confidentiality, and informed consent, while providing the research teams with insight on how to adapt the process to increase engagement. In

another project, research funding was allocated to hire a full-time community coordinator position that supported health within the school. The school has committed to maintaining this position even after the funding was no longer available.

The ARC members place special emphasis on supporting youth leadership development in the community. For example, in one project, one of the youth participants was invited to contribute artwork to illustrate the research findings of a photovoice project that included high school students, and to co-present at several conferences about her research experience. In another project, postsecondary students from the community, who were attending a tribal college, took part in a 39-hour CBPR course. The practicum component of this course had the students working alongside graduate students and academics as co-researchers, helping to conduct focus groups and interviews with Elders, adults, and youth in the community. Three of these students were hired as research assistants to support data analysis and reporting for the project on behalf of the community.

**Quality of the research process and products.** Quality, also referred to as rigor, is a highly contested concept in CBPR (Crooks, Snowshoe, Chiodo, & Brunette-Debassige, 2013; Kingsley & Chapman, 2013). When operating outside the post-positivist realms of rigor and within a CBPR context, social, ethical, and cultural validity become important indicators of research quality in addition to conventional validity indicators (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). To ensure that the research process is aligned with cultural protocols, ARC members offer their input regarding different stages of the research process, including data collection methods, tools and questionnaires, and interpretation of findings. For instance, in one research project, which involved the development of a questionnaire for assessing young children’s learning, Elders provided instruction on child development and were involved in co-developing questionnaire items, domains, and interpreting scores. ARC and community members’ input into data interpretation ensures that findings are contextualized and interpreted through a community and cultural lens. In addition to ARC members, other community members are invited to provide input into the research process through community forums. One community member described this as an asset to the research process:

I think, just generally knowing that, every one of the community members has a voice and say and can contribute to that process. I think that has been a benefit to research in Alexander. And throughout the process we’ve always encouraged our own community members, not just our staff.

At times, the voice of the ARC has initiated bigger changes to intervention research projects. The voice of the ARC is now sought for advice about projects outside of Alexander First Nation, thus extending its impact and reach beyond the community. For instance, after consultation with ARC members, changes were made to a nutrition survey that was being used as part of a larger provincial project with First Nations children. Furthermore, members of the ARC and those involved with research projects in AFN have been highlighted in local newspapers and the provincial health authority magazine, and celebrated on television and through YouTube.

**School-level practice and policy.** Several practices have shifted at the KEC as a result of the knowledge that the ARC has gained and created from the many health, nutrition, and education projects it has led in the AFN community. One of the projects, which focused on understanding healthy development from a

First Nation perspective, developed a questionnaire through focus groups and interviews with youth, adults, and Elders in the community. Parents and teachers of kindergarten-aged children at KEC completed the questionnaire. It highlighted the children's cultural knowledge, cultural skills, first language fluency, and connections with family and important role models who support their growth and development. Developing the questionnaire and reviewing the results reinforced the importance of both the Cree immersion program for students in primary grades (kindergarten to Grade 3) and the continued support of a fluent Cree instructor and educational assistant in each classroom.

Over the past decade, ARC-supported health and nutrition research at KEC has led to many integrated learning opportunities for students, such as growing fruits and vegetables in classrooms and eating wild game from traditional hunts for the school's hot lunch program. A nutrition policy has been implemented in the school that reinforces nutrition and an active living environment. For example, KEC has removed all junk food from its canteen, offers a nutritious breakfast and hot lunch program, and will only allow healthy choices for birthdays and other celebrations. As one ARC member put it, she is not the only "broccoli police" anymore; staff and students who place emphasis on healthy eating and lifestyle choices join her in patrolling the halls.

### **Discussion**

A research steering committee, sometimes called a community advisory board is common in CBPR (D'Alonzo, 2010; Jacklin & Kinoshameg, 2008). At each stage of a research project, it can function as an anchoring site for engagement between research partners, and it can support strong channels of communication with the community at large (Adams & Faulkhead, 2012). This article provides an example of the collective experiences of a 10-year-old multidisciplinary research committee operating within a First Nation community in Canada. Through interviews, a focus group, and document review, ARC members reflected on the foundations of their working relationship, the sustainability of the committee, and the research impacts of the ARC.

CBPR has been and continues to be used by academics in Canada as a desired ethical approach to research with First Nations communities because it facilitates shared leadership, decision making, and ownership over research (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Cargo & Merccer, 2008; Castelden et al., 2012). Ross et al. (2010), for example, have noted:

[The] implicit promise of research collaboration between academic and community research partners is that each group has the opportunity and authority to exercise agency—each group has a right to provide input regarding the course of the project and a right that this input be weighed and considered by the partner group. (Ross et al., 2010, p. 2)

The ARC embodies and realizes this promise by acting as a trusted community-based decision-making body for research initiatives conducted at KEC.

The success of the ARC in terms of its impact and ability to sustain its role and function in the community over time has been attributed to many factors, as reflected by the ARC members. As Zavala (2013) has noted, "decolonizing research strategies are less about the struggle for method and more about the spaces that make decolonizing research possible" (p. 55). Through trusting relationships, open dialogue, co-mentoring, and community participation, the ARC has been able to establish a

transformative and ethical learning space for CBPR partners in AFN. Trusting relationships amongst CBPR partners take time to develop and need to be nurtured (Castleden et al., 2012; Israel et al., 1998). The ARC takes this very seriously, and seeks to build these relationships by operating within a space of capacity strengthening and co-learning, setting up *Guiding Principles*, and having a shared vision for “optimizing the health and well-being of children and families in Alexander.”

One of the key tenets of CBPR is that research resulting from CBPR frameworks should create knowledge that is actionable and meaningful to communities (Castleden et al., 2012; Darroch & Giles, 2014; Israel et al., 1998). Several impacts of research have been realized in AFN because community champions and academic partners have together committed to the well-being of AFN children. The committee takes responsibility for conducting, translating, and mobilizing knowledge within and beyond the community with the goal of influencing practice, program, and policy changes. They do this by sharing knowledge that has been created as a result of research in AFN within their own spheres of influence. This sharing may take the form of briefs or presentations to Chief and Council, school personnel, or at academic and professional conferences.

The implicit and explicit capacity strengthening that has happened because of participation in the ARC for community members, graduate trainees, youth co-researchers, and academics is profound. Each member has increased knowledge and skills around the research process, taken a project from conceptualization to dissemination collaboratively, and deepened cultural knowledge through teachings that have been shared by Elders and ARC members from the AFN community. The infrastructure set in place by projects, which provides opportunities for employment for community members, the capacity to hire graduate RA's to gather agenda items and take minutes at each meeting, the resources to travel to the community for face-to-face meetings each month, and the resources to offer a meal each time we gather, has been critical in facilitating opportunities for learning and dialogue. This practice is encouraged in CBPR partnerships (e.g., Israel et al., 2008) and this article points to the value of these opportunities for maximizing the impact and reach of research. The positive changes in the school environment since the start of the 2006 partnership are noteworthy: a comprehensive school nutrition policy is now part of the fabric of the school and recent funding, made available in 2016, has supported an after school physical education and healthy snack program called the Aboriginal Youth Mentorship Program.

### **Factors Limiting ARC's Scope and Impact**

As with all CBPR partnerships, the ARC has faced and continues to face some challenges. For instance, sustaining a diverse membership base, with representation from multiple AFN community departments and from the community at-large is a prevailing issue for the committee. Department directors may be reluctant to have their employees attend meetings that they feel do not directly impact their department's mandate. Efforts to encourage community members to attend meetings have been met with limited success. Community members might feel insufficiently qualified to contribute to conversations about research activities. Moreover, much of the communication between ARC members about meeting dates and times is done using email, which poses a challenge for interested community members who do not have an internet connection or who do not use email. Attendance of Elders at meetings has also been inconsistent. Another challenge is determining when an academic researcher's membership on the ARC ends: Is it at the end of a researcher's project or when that person can no

longer meaningfully contribute to the ARC? Who determines what is and is not a meaningful contribution? The committee is wrestling with these issues and amending *Guiding Principles* to include collective statements about how to handle adding and terminating membership. A deeper examination of these challenges can provide further insights on the strategies that ARC members have used and what has been successful or unsuccessful. This could be useful information for other committees or community advisory boards struggling with similar issues.

We recognize that not every committee can have the high level of engagement described in this article. Indeed, the high level of engagement with the ARC has been made possible by both the relatively short travel time between the University of Alberta and AFN, as well as the continuous funding that brought resources to the projects and the community. CBPR practices are easier to implement when researchers are near a community with which collaborative relationships can be developed and sustained (Ritchie et al., 2013). For these reasons, it is important to consider contextual factors that may influence the sustainability and impact of a community research committee. Ultimately, CBPR projects must reflect the place, circumstances, and proximity of the collaborating partners (Ritchie et al., 2013).

### Conclusions and Policy Implications

Recognizing that all communities are unique in their histories, languages, and cultural practices, these conclusions and policy implications are shared as a starting point of conversation. The ARC is an example of how decolonizing research can be practiced within a First Nations context, given an optimal confluence of supporting circumstances, and how it can lead to impactful knowledge generation and tangible policy changes at the community level. Word has spread about the ARC through community members' inclusion on research manuscripts and participation in meetings and conferences related to ARC research projects. Because of this, community members of the ARC have been invited to speak about the committee and their experiences co-leading CBPR projects with researchers. Sharing this experience and expertise will hopefully lead to other First Nations communities producing research partnerships that are mutually reinforcing and which contribute to the health and well-being of their members. The case of the ARC demonstrates the impactful potential of community research committees operating within decolonizing research spaces. As described through this article and reflected in the TCPS 2 (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014), the ARC ensures a balance of power between researchers and Indigenous participants through community-developed and supported *Guiding Principles* for research conduct. As one community member stated, referring to *Guiding Principles*:

It is not a contract for the relationships; it just outlines and writes out how we work and helps to guide the meetings so they can truly be a learning space.

In other words, it fosters wâhkôhtowin in research.

The report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) has called upon all levels of government to acknowledge Aboriginal rights and fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007). Decolonizing research emanating from the ARC shows that research that is respectful and based on true partnership is an act of reconciliation. The ARC is a powerful example of why governments must support Indigenous Peoples to engage in research based on social justice. The recognition that research can be a decolonizing and



reconciliatory process is an important first step, however, to do this respectfully in true partnership requires that funding agencies and academic institutions provide academics and communities engaged in CBPR with sufficient resources, time, and flexibility to allow for true participatory and collaborative work to take place.

As the case of the ARC has shown, trusting relationships take time to develop but can be impactful once established. While not usually the case, favorable circumstances permitted two of the academic authors to have sufficient time and resources to fully engage in CBPR. One of the researchers (NDW) has a health scholar award, which reduces her teaching and administrative responsibilities, and another (RJG) is housed within a faculty that places significant emphasis on community-engaged scholarship. However, current academic and funding institution constraints make it difficult to establish long-term successful community–university partnerships. New policies and reward structures that allow for flexibility and community leadership can go a long way in strengthening the practice of decolonizing CBPR approaches (Castleden, Sylvestre, Martin, & McNally, 2015).

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