

School-Based Karate-Do: Supporting The Well-Being of Gay Male Youth

Jacky W. L. Chan, Lakehead University, Canada

Abstract: This paper explores how the traditional practice of karate-do can support the overall well-being of gay male youth (GMY). Many GMY are at a heightened risk of mental health issues that are linked to heteronormative attitudes, homophobic discrimination, and hegemonic masculinity found within sport culture. The traditional martial art of karate-do has the potential to be an effective mental health strategy for GMY. However, the commercialization of martial arts has meant the loss of its philosophical values as a traditional practice towards an overall sense of well-being and has become associated and confused with a violent and combative nature. These benefits have been misunderstood by the general public through organizations like the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) franchise and the practice of mixed martial arts (MMA) for competition and sport. This paper explores the benefits of a school-based karate-do program as an embodied well-being program for GMY. This paper concludes with a list of recommendations that will help support educators, physical education teachers, and school administrators in the implementation of a school-based karate-do program as an embodied well-being practice for GMY within Canadian schools.

Keywords: mental illness; mental health promotion; gay male youth; well-being strategies; karate-do; martial arts; hegemonic masculinity in sport; embodied well-being; school-based martial arts program

Introduction

My personal story of falling victim to bullies and social exclusion resulted in many years of physical and psychological abuse. Twenty-three years of training in regular karate practice has supported my struggle towards finding a sense of place as a “half-Asian” living with my mother in a predominantly white-privileged community. The practice of karate has further supported my struggle in finding a sense of belonging as a “half-Caucasian” with my estranged father and his Asian cultural background. Moreover, karate has been crucial as a support system in dealing with the everyday challenges of living with Tourette’s Syndrome, ADHD, and Intermittent Explosive Disorder, all undiagnosed disorders until my late twenties. My lived experience of embodied karate practice has given me the strength and resilience to re-engage with the social world, and has acted as a foundational framework towards leading a meaningful and fulfilled life. This embodiment of karate practice has in turn given me the opportunity to co-found a not-for-profit organization that engages in global social justice initiatives with marginalized youth around the world.

All Canadian youth are increasingly at risk for mental distress and other mental health-related concerns (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Herman & Jane-Llopis, 2005; Murnaghan, Morrison, Laurence, & Bell, 2014). Additionally, the results of a recent study on Canadian high school students found that these concerns are even greater among gay male youth (GMY) who reported higher rates of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment than heterosexual youth (Taylor, et al., 2011). Consequently, GMY are more emotionally distressed, insecure, and socially excluded within their school communities, which often leads to truancy, underachievement, and early drop outs; hence, higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Taylor, et al., 2011; Marshal et al., 2011).

Participation in physical exercises, such as school-based sports and sports-based activities is a well-established wellness facilitator and coping strategy (Bergeron, 2007; Doull, Watson, Smith, Homma, & Saewyc, 2016; Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). However, Doull et al. (2016) stated that GMY are only half as likely to participate/enrol in school-based sports as their straight counterparts due to the homophobic behaviours and culture that exists. These homophobic behaviours often surface as sexual stereotyping (e.g., gender norms), sexually demeaning language (e.g., name calling such as “faggot” or “queer”), and sexual harassment (e.g., rumours, malicious gossip, and cyberbullying because of sexuality), and often appear in phys-ed changerooms, washrooms, and hallways (Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Taylor, et al., 2011).

In this paper, I discuss the possibilities of mental health promotion for GMY in six ways. First, I describe how GMY are at a heightened risk of mental health issues due to heteronormativity, homophobic discrimination, and hegemonic masculinity. Second, I explain what martial arts and karate are. Third, I provide an overview of how karate can promote well-being among GMY. Fourth, I discuss how the obstacles and perceptions of martial arts and

karate are skewed by the display of hegemonic masculinity in mixed-martial arts (MMA) and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Fifth, I explore the benefits of a school-based karate program as an embodied well-being practice for GMY. Finally, I conclude by providing recommendations for educators, physical education teachers, and school administrators on how these obstacles can be overcome.

Mental Health

Mental health refers to the condition of an individual's overall well-being that includes their capacity for self-actualization, their ability to cope with everyday stresses, their ability to engage productively in working life, and their ability and desire to contribute to community (Herman & Jane-Llopis, 2005). Mental health is a continuous struggle for all Canadian youth that is causing physical and psychological health issues that are impacting their school lives (Murnaghan et al., 2014). According to Russell (2003), for sexual minorities like GMY, these psychological issues often manifest as chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. As a result, these mood disorders can lead to additional negative consequences for their social, emotional, and academic development (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Rempel, 2012). Governments, school boards, and school communities are challenged by these health concerns as they struggle to understand how to provide effective support to improve the environmental and educational factors that are impacting students' well-being (Airton, 2009; Murnaghan et al., 2014).

Mental Health Among Gay Male Youth

Heteronormativity is embedded within the fabric of society (in government, educational institutions, and sport culture) and is the normalization of heterosexuality as the dominant and hegemonic discourse of the gender binary, where heterosexism is perceived as the only norm that one can fit into (Yep, 2003). Yep (2003) further illustrated heteronormativity as the "invisible center and the presumed bedrock of society, [and] is the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others" (p. 18). It can be viewed, then, that those who do not conform to this gendered and heterosexist discourse can fall prey to homophobia and homophobic discrimination (Airton, 2009). To resolve any misunderstandings of the term homophobia, Airton (2009) described it as the fear or hate of a person who is not heterosexual, or who is not perceived to be heterosexual.

Homophobic discrimination, then, can be seen as a method that perpetuates heteronormative attitudes and the gender binary. Unfortunately, this discrimination regularly leads to hostility and harassment from others that can contribute to negative consequences to one's overall well-being (Doull et al., 2016). An example of these consequences can be lower grades in school, higher rates of truancy for fear of personal safety, higher drop out rates, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, and suicide completions (Lugg, 2003; Morrow & Gill, 2003; Taylor, et al., 2011). Sadly, suicide has become the second leading cause of preventable death for all Canadian youth, with suicide rates being higher among those who do not conform to the gender binary (Russell, 2003; Sampasa-Kanyinga, Roumeliotis, & Xu, 2014).

The foundation of a cultural dominance of heteronormativity and homophobia can be linked to hegemonic masculinity (Channon, 2012). The term hegemonic masculinity is characterized by the embodiment of power, muscularity, strength, athleticism, competition, aggression, and the ability to physically dominate other people (e.g., a man's direct physical control over another person through acts of intimidation, aggression, or violence; Channon, 2012; Follo, 2012). This paper refers to hegemonic masculinity in sport and MMA and how the attribute of hegemonic masculinity re-enforces heteronormativity and homophobia. Hegemonic masculinity in sport and MMA will be addressed further in this paper. It follows, then, that the discrimination, victimization, and harassment towards GMY, by means of heteronormative, homophobic, and hegemonic masculine attitudes and behaviours, has negatively affected the overall well-being of GMY (Airton, 2009; Channon, 2012; Doull et al., 2016).

Traditional Martial Arts, Karate-Do, and Mixed Martial Arts

A school-based karate program could help support LGBTQ youth in feeling safe within their school environment, while also providing them with the skills to manage their overall well-being. But first, some clarification of terms is

needed. Within the context of this paper, the term *martial art(s)* refers to both *traditional martial arts* and *modern sport-oriented martial art(s)*. Additionally, martial arts with the suffix *-jutsu* generally refer to combative systems that primarily focus on fighting and protection (Draeger & Smith, 1974). Example of these systems are kenjutsu, ninjutsu, jujitsu, and karate-jitsu, which are modern sport-oriented martial arts. MMA also fits into this combative category. Martial arts with the suffix *-do*, from the root word *budo*, or “martial way,” in Japanese, are “less combatively oriented” (Draeger & Smith, 1974, p. 91). Kendo, judo, aikido, and karate-do are representative of these practices. In karate-do, the *way* “represents the means of attaining the true meaning of life through the path of karate training” (Mattson, 1963, p. 20). Hence, this paper illustrates the benefits of karate-do as an embodied well-being practice for LGBTQ youth, where the *-do*, or the way, refers to the application of the philosophical nature of karate-do for well-being. And so, the suffix *-do* will be added to karate from this point onward.

Karate-Do as a Traditional Martial Art Practice

The practice of karate-do for well-being was never intended for the sole purpose of combat and competition, but instead was regarded as a means for the self-cultivation of spiritual growth through mental, emotional, and physical training (Brown, 2013; Theeboom & Knop, 1999). The philosophical teachings within karate-do were used to bring about a greater sense of self-awareness that encouraged the practitioner to work on their internal struggles (Berg & Prohl, 2014). Priest (2013) asserted that “greater inner peace leads naturally to greater outer peace. Those with inner peace have less desire to be aggressive or violent to others (or themselves)” (p. 28). This philosophy of mindfulness and internal reflection teaches the student that the real conflict lies inside of the mind and that, if controlled, can lead towards a state of positive well-being (Brown, 2013). Practitioners of karate-do understand that the philosophy of their art gives a higher priority to the spiritual aspect over the combative aspect (Čapulis, 2010).

Theeboom and Knop (1999) explained that a traditional martial art program must fulfill four criteria: a) an acknowledgment of the cultural origin of the art; b) development of combative ability; c) the inclusion of artistic capacity, such as painting or dance; and d) spiritual growth. The development of combative abilities is embodied through physical movements and expressed through *kata* or “forms” in Japanese. Priest explained how the physical movement from *kata* practice is used as a form of mindful meditation:

Developing a *kata* can be done only with great mindfulness of one’s body, the position of one’s limbs, the angle and speed of movement...a *kata* should be performed with complete focus and concentration. When one performs the move of the *kata*, that and only that is where one’s being is. In the context of Buddhist meditation practices, this would be called ‘one-pointedness.’ (2013, p. 26)

The inclusion of artistic ability brings a balanced, holistic approach to the training program. Twemlow and Sacco (1998) emphasized this artistic approach when acknowledging that “the fiercest Samurai also trained in brush painting, flower arrangement, haiku writing, and solving conundrums that foster a positive ethic” (p. 514). An example of bringing artistic ability into a school-based karate-do program could be: a) learning how to make and play a traditional Japanese musical instrument; b) movement with music (coordinated dance movements); and c) learning calligraphy and/or painting to express emotions and feelings.

Traditional Martial Art Philosophy

The philosophy of karate-do is embodied within the concept of mindfulness. This narrative and principal of mindfulness is derived from Zen Buddhism and is used to perfect every movement and to connect the mind-body coordination that is involved in practice (Brown, 2013; Mattson, 1963). It is important to note that the concept of Zen within karate-do is not about religion or religious practice, but is about being present. This presence, or awareness, can be achieved through the three different mindsets that are practiced within karate-do: a) *mushin*, or “selfless concentration,” which teaches students to control their emotions; b) *samadhi*, or “one-pointed concentration,” which prepares students to focus on one thing at a time; and c) *hishiryō*, or “automatic thinking,” teaches students to be competent in overall awareness (Twemlow & Sacco, 1998). Nagamine (1976) further explained how these mindsets are achieved through the practice:

Karate training takes devotees along the path of self-development. Every movement, every step in karate training requires one to make a total commitment of self...The fusing of mind and body in karate is indescribably beautiful. The flow of the mind, when totally absorbed during kata practice, brings a person into contact with essence and care of his being. (p. 271)

This mental training teaches the practitioner how to disconnect with negative emotions, thoughts, and mental distractions that allows a state of inner peace to be achieved. It is important to recognize that a school-based karate-do program should include this mindfulness approach to benefit from these positive outcomes. Consequently, mindfulness-based approaches have recently been included within the field of education as a means of therapeutic intervention (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008; Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2005).

Mindfulness

Several mindfulness-based therapy (MBT) programs have been developed and established to promote mindfulness as a means to treating a variety of mental health illnesses, including depression and anxiety (Smith-Carrier et al., 2014; Van Vliet et al., 2017). The mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program—one of the most widely recognized and accepted MBT programs—was created by Jon Kabat-Zin, a medical professor and Zen Buddhist practitioner (Van Vliet et al., 2017).

According to Greenberg and Harris (2012) and Meiklejohn et al., (2012), school-based mindfulness programs have proven to be an effective strategy towards building resilience and promoting well-being in youth. Moreover, research has found that school-based mindfulness programs can support emotional regulation, the building of interpersonal skills, the promotion of inner well-being, and learning in youth (Mendelson et al., 2010; Smith-Carrier et al., 2014). In fact, many schools have now incorporated mindfulness programs as a strategy to help support students with the management of depression and anxiety (Greenberg and Harris, 2012; Rempel, 2012). Not only can a school-based mindfulness program helped support students, but also teachers (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). According to Meiklejohn et al. (2012), such programs can increase occupational engagement and promote positive teacher-student relationships, while improving their (teachers) overall well-being by decreasing occupational stress, burnout, and absenteeism.

On the other hand, some studies have shown that engaging youth in mindfulness practices can be challenging because of lack of interest from youth learners (Smith-Carrier et al., 2014; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Therefore, it has been suggested that a successful school-based mindfulness program should incorporate a variety of active and embodied movements to obtain maximum benefits (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008; Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2005). A school-based karate-do program as an embodied movement well-being practice could be a viable solution.

Spirituality in Traditional Martial Art Practice

A successful school-based karate-do program should consider the philosophical elements of traditional martial arts in order to maximize the potential well-being benefits. An extension of this philosophy is spirituality through self-mastery of techniques and movement. Spirituality through physicality has been used as a medium in the development of spiritual growth amongst children and practitioners of traditional martial arts, and it has been understood that learning from movement can further develop this relationship (Cynarski, 2001; Hackney, 2009). Physical and cultural practices such as karate-do, skateboarding, free running, and surfing can all be envisioned as a form of spiritual exercise that connects the mind and body to the surrounding environment (Brown, 2013). According to sports psychologists, this spiritual experience can also be described as *being in the zone* or as a *state of flow* and occurs when a person is performing at their very best (Brown, 2013). This spiritual experience can lead to spiritual growth within karate-do and is achieved by self-mastery through physical movement (Čapulic, 2010; Hackney, 2009). These physical movements are embodied through the practice of kata. Brown's (2013) research suggested that the practice of kata has been "particularly significant for the development of children's spirituality through physicality in schools" (p. 37). Therefore, the practice of spirituality as a state of flow through physical movement should be considered as an important element when considering a well-being program. It is necessary to mention that spirituality in this context does not refer to any form of religious practice, but rather as a state of being and a vehicle towards self-actualization and greater meaning in one's life.

Perceptions of Karate-Do as Influenced by Mixed Martial Arts

The focus of mixed-martial arts (MMA) towards athletic competition and sport has disregarded the philosophical values of traditional martial arts that were once revered as a path towards inner peace and spiritual growth (Chapman, 2004; Follo, 2012). The Westernization and misappropriation of traditional martial arts have bred what is known as MMA (Channon, 2012). MMA is a new genre of combative sports that combines a variety of martial arts styles and Western sport such as karate-do, judo, boxing, kickboxing, and jujitsu. The emergence and popularity of MMA in the West have shifted the cultural status and integrity of traditional martial arts into a mostly male professional sport of excessive and masculinized violence (Channon, 2012). The popularity of MMA, perpetuated by commercial profit and hegemonic masculinity, has now spawned another extreme combative sport, the creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship or the UFC franchise (Chapman, 2004; Hirose & Pih, 2010).

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)

It is essential to look at how martial arts have been sensationalized in popular culture to understand the hyper-masculine dominance within MMA. The UFC was started in 1992 and is currently the largest brand of MMA competition: in 2012 nearly \$6 million USD was spent on Pay-Per-View matches alone. The organization's target audience is people 18-34 years of age, with viewer demographics reported at just over 60% male (Weaving, 2014). Weaving (2014) pointed out that UFC is "marketed as a hyper-masculine enterprise and in 2008 was promoted as the 'the most controversial event of the decade' because there are 'no rules' and 'two men enter, one man leaves'" (p. 130). The violent competition takes place between two fighters in a cage called The Octagon, and has limited rules: No throat strikes; no butting with the head; no putting a finger into any orifice; no clawing, pinching, or twisting the flesh; and no timidity (Ultimate Fighting Championship, n.d.). All other strikes and movements are fair game.

Not only has MMA and the UFC compromised the mental health potential of martial arts, but has also contributed to the strongly held beliefs of heteronormativity and the continuation of hegemonic masculinity in sport culture. It is important to mention that this is not an argument towards which martial art, traditional (karate-do) or modern (MMA), is better than the other, but rather to clarify the differences between them. Certainly, a modern-sport oriented martial art could undoubtedly have positive benefits to the practitioner. However, these forms of martial arts lack the approach to achieving an overall sense of wellness, and creates barriers for engagement of individuals who do not fit within the gender binary. Additionally, the focus of this paper is to explore how a system, such as karate-do, could be introduced as an embodied well-being program for GMY within Canadian schools.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Sport

Hegemonic masculinity is viewed by some people as a foundation towards a cultural dominance of homophobia (Channon, 2012). Although hegemonic masculinity can be seen in many cultures, the understanding of this concept is rooted in social and cultural environments and can differ from region to region (Hirose & Pih, 2010). Hence, for the context of this paper, hegemonic masculinity is referred to as it is perceived within sport. A dominant vision of masculinity has been reinforced by social norms and reproduced through individuals' compliance with these norms (Follo, 2012). No other domain of activity can provide a better example of hegemonic masculine or normative attitudes and behaviours than within the institution of sport (Chapman, 2004; Follo, 2012).

The participation and active engagement of sport is generally introduced to youth during elementary school physical education classes and extra-curricular sports programs. Recent studies have shown that the participation in team sports can improve psychological and social health, and has been found to reduce stress, depression, and anxiety in children and youth (e.g., Eime et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Additionally, participation in school-based sports and extra-curricular sports have shown to reduce suicide ideation and attempts (Vella et al., 2018). This is because participation in sports can build confidence, emotional self-efficacy, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging (interacting with others for a common goal); which, in turn, can lower emotional distress, social anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and depression (Eime et al., 2013; Ströhle et al., 2007; Taliaferro, Rienzo, Miller, Pigg, & Dodd, 2008). Additionally, physical engagement in sport maintains

muscular strength, cardiovascular health, endurance, and overall physical fitness that helps support the overall physical and mental health of youth (Mendelson, 2010; Ströhle et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, sport culture has placed an obligation on male youth to conform to heteronormative norms—whether they wish to or not—for the risk being targeted or victimized by their peers. As a result, Gay Male Youth are particularly at risk of becoming a victim to harassment and abuse (Plummer, 2006). So too are those who do not fully ascribe to all of the masculine traits held up through hegemonic masculinity, and are likely to be less inclined to participate in sport culture. Doull et al. (2016) illustrated this by pointing out that 30% of youth who do not escribe to the gender binary have reported being bullied or harassed while participating on school sports teams. Additionally, over 50% of these individuals reported being harassed while taking part in physical education classes because of their sexual orientation. In sum, youth who do not conform to heteronormativity are unlikely to participate in sport and, as a result, will not benefit from the positive mental health improvements that other youth will gain.

Karate-Do as a Well-being Strategy in Schools

The philosophy of karate-do practice aims towards homogeneity between the spiritual, mental, and physical states of being (Brown, 2013). Such a program could prove to be beneficial as a form of embodied learning to promote overall well-being in students (Brown, 2013; Lelwica, 2009; Theeboom & Knop, 1999). According to Twemlow and Sacco (1998) a karate-do program should follow four stages of learning: 1) *Gyo*, the preparatory stage in which the student becomes familiar with the art, instructor, and the body as a means of self-expression; 2) *Shugyo*, the development of technique; 3) *Jutso*, the mastery of technique; and, 4) *Do*, the advanced level of understanding.

Rempel (2012) states that the benefits of integrating a karate-do training program into a school setting can be "significant in regards to effects on cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual domains" (p. 216). Similar to these effects, Theeboom and Knop (1999) discovered that students who participated in a school-based physical education karate-do program found that their training compensated for feelings of lack of safety, order, and discipline, and these students felt that they were better able to overcome everyday challenges. The positive attributes associated with experience-based activities, such as karate-do practice that does not focus on competition, but rather on direct experience, have proven to be beneficial in the overall well-being of elementary and high school students (Berg & Prohl, 2014; Cynaski, 2011). Moreover, a karate-do program has been used as an effective means to address social-emotional issues that marginalized youth regularly face (Milligan, Badali, & Spiroiu, 2015). Additionally, this program has been found to provide positive social outcomes, such as decreased conflicts at home and in everyday life (Twemlow, 1998, as well as positive impacts on academic performance and physiological well-being (Rempel, 2012).

Recommendations

In order to implement a successful school-based karate-do program as an overall well-being strategy for Gay Male Youth, the following objectives for students outlined by Twemlow & Sacco (1998) should be considered:

- (1) A commitment to respectful attitude, kindness, and self-protection through nonviolence;
- (2) a commitment to leadership and nonjudgmental role modeling, virtuous behavior, and altruistic service to others;
- (3) a commitment to try hard, stay healthy, learn to overcome fear and possessiveness, develop confidence, and exercise restraint in the face of provocation. (p. 510)

Based on the in depth exploration provided through this paper, there are four additional recommendations for educators designing and implementing a curriculum program. First, instructors should avoid focusing on the competitive aspects of karate-do. Second, instructors should not solely emphasize combat. Although combat is important in the development of self-defense techniques, it should not be the primary focus. Third, instructors should emphasize mindfulness through embodied movement practice and the cultivation of spiritual growth through mental, emotional, and physical training. This is related to the practice of kata. Finally, instructors should create a communication strategy directed towards policy makers, educational administrators, educators, parents/guardians, and the general public that dispels the myths of martial arts and karate-do. More specifically, this strategy should

call attention to karate-do as a school-based program that focuses on well-being components. While these recommendations are a conceptualization of a karate-do program that can benefit *all* youth. However, it can also be accessible for gender and sexual minority youth who otherwise would run the risk of being marginalized by this type of (sport related) practice.

Conclusion

In this paper, I described how Gay Male Youth are at risk of mental health issues that are linked to heteronormative attitudes, homophobic discrimination, and hegemonic masculinity, all of which create implications for their well-being (Airton, 2009; Marshal et al., 2011; Morrow & Gill, 2003). Following this, I introduced martial arts and explained the philosophical and spiritual aspects of karate-do. I explained how the practice of karate-do strives for mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual unity through movement-based practice. I then provided an overview of how karate-do has the potential to be an effective mental health strategy for GMY (Milligan et al., 2015; Theeboom & Knop, 1999; Twemlow, 2008). I outlined how the Westernization and commercialization of martial arts and karate-do have meant the loss of its accumulated philosophical values as a traditional practice towards an overall sense of well-being (Channon, 2012; Hackney, 2009). I further explained how the misrepresentation of karate-do as an embodied well-being strategy can be linked to the co-optation of karate into mixed-martial arts and the high popularity of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. From there I described how martial arts and karate-do are misunderstood as forms of combat and contact sports that perpetuate heteronormativity, homophobia, and hegemonic masculinity (Airton, 2009; Fair, 2011; Hirose & Pih, 2010; Marrow & Gill, 2003). I then deconstructed these myths and introduced the benefits of a school-based karate-do program as an embodied well-being program for GMY, while expanding that such a program could benefit *all* youth. I conclude with a list of recommendations that will help support the implementation of a karate-do program within Canadian schools. My intention in writing this paper was to give policy makers, educational administrators, educators, parents/guardians, and the general public a better understanding of martial arts and to explore how a school-based karate-do program could be an effective embodied well-being strategy for GMY.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacky W. L. Chan: Jacky is currently a graduate student in the Masters of Education for Change program at Lakehead University. His M.Ed. research focuses on Indigenous youth wellbeing and resilience through an embodied healing practice of Laughter Yoga. This innovative mental health leadership for First Nation youth from remote communities has been developed through the Tikkun Youth Project: Pedagogies of Repair and Reconciliation (funded through the University of Windsor) and recognized through various national awards (3M National Student Fellowship and SSHRC). This is Jacky's first publication.